

Sur Pippa

'Notes of Running Feet'  
English in Primary Textbooks

Rimli Bhattacharya

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an eklavya publication

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Layout & cover design: Rakesh Khatri

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'Notes of Running feet' from Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, 2005

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## *Sur Pippa*

*For Pippa, friend, colleague and accomplice in continental exchanges...*

Pippa Stein (1956-2008) taught at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, but her interests and commitment spilled over to many other spaces.

Our collaboration began via e-mail in the summer of 2004 over a comparative project on 'subject English' spanning three cities, Delhi, Johannesburg and London. Over the next three years, six of us, colleagues from each of these cities, worked intensively, meeting in different continents, focusing on classroom interaction, and trying to understand our respective locations, the specific problems as well as the shared histories of our countries. Pippa held us all together. A few excerpts from her writing come at the end of this book.

*Sur Pippa* as a project had a spontaneous origin one evening in 2008 when I was in a meeting with the Eklavya team and came to know that Pippa was no more. I have since worked together with my students, friends and strangers on this and other projects, including one on lullabies, with the belief that something of Pippa's vision, courage and compassion must inspire and sustain us in these difficult times.

The name I chose — *Sur Pippa* — resonates in many tongues like a melody dancing through time and space.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Rimi".

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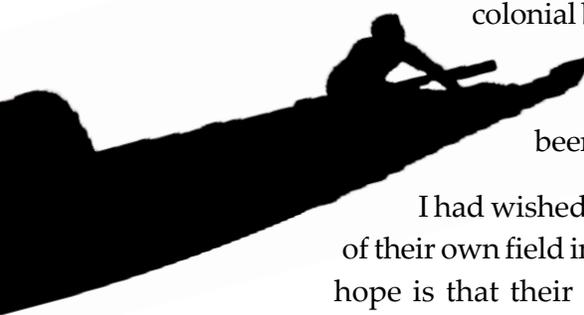
# Reflections on Texts, Textbooks and Children

So much has been written on textbooks and the textbook tradition in India and so little has happened to the writing inside of textbooks and how they are accessed by children, that it might seem to be an act of indulgence in looking yet again at a set of textbooks. So, is there anything different about this very modest pilot project?

For one, it has been undertaken by three young college teachers who have never had any formal training in the discipline of education. They have been students of English literature — a discipline which has itself undergone major changes, if not a reinvention, in the last several decades. The last quarter of the 20th century saw a self-conscious attempt within the discipline, both regionally and across the globe, to question the canon as well as the location of its own dissemination in terms of colonial baggage. Subsequently, as 'English Studies', the discipline has been greatly shaped by the specific contours of multiple postcolonialisms. Most significantly (for me), there has been a venturing into other disciplines and other literatures.

I had wished that the researchers might bring something of the turbulence of their own field into what might appear a very different and distant terrain. My hope is that their very lack of formal training in matters related to primary education has enabled them to offer some insights from a fresh perspective. To that end, I left the choice of class, textbook and the final texts for close study entirely to the individual researcher, while we worked as a group in sharing and questioning ongoing observations. I know that the experience of working on this micro project has made them aware of the immense patience, introspection and receptivity required to make any meaningful contribution to this area.

Above all, the project seeks to reach out across the great distances that exist for the most part in academia today. These glimpses into the day-to-day travails, and



occasionally, excitement of the world of the (un)common Indian child in his or her English class make those of us who are professionally aligned with 'higher education' question some of our fundamental assumptions.

From my location as a student of Comparative Literature, I have found the changes in the discipline of English literature affirmative for the most part, but also alarming. The first for obvious reasons; the second, stemming perhaps from a sense of disquiet. One is often witness to the somewhat unthinking forays into and appropriation of terrains, media or genres that are rarely engaged with in any meaningful way. Interdisciplinary work is rigorous, and requires an orientation in multiple disciplines.

Undoubtedly, access to the English language and a location in 'English Literature' translates into a position of power. This is not only in the job market, as is commonly perceived. English had already become a 'major language for wire services' with the patenting of the telegraph in 1837. British colonialism and the overarching role of the US in world economy since WWII ensured that English became 'international', even as the language of science. The unrestrained flow of capital in our times (often in ways unpredictable and unmanageable to those who 'control' it) ensures the dominant role of English.

Given my own training I believe that this hegemony can be somewhat countered by seeking to learn other literatures on their own terms. Indeed, in trying to understand the 'literary' and the 'textual' *on the terms of* individual traditions. This is particularly significant in many parts of Asia where people have continued to foster innumerable visual, oral and performative forms even through newer global conduits.

And so too with languages. Over the last several decades one notes in the literature departments of academia an unwillingness to engage with other tongues in any in-depth manner. This is strange and sad, given the rich culture of multilingualism still alive in the Indian subcontinent. At any given moment most of us are negotiating with at least two or three languages in very different ways. The erasure and loss of languages that otherwise define our everyday life has also been an area of concern, seeping into this project, and at the heart of a companion project I conceptualized at this same time, also supported by Eklavya and Sir Ratan Tata Trust. I began by calling it the 'sleep/y songs' project in Mizo, Asamiya, Khasi and Kumaoni; it extended to include 'playsongs' as well. It is hard to draw a line very often between one genre and another as song moves to dance, and the aural to the visual.<sup>1</sup>

How much of our own selves do we deny, or rather, are we *taught* to deny once we step into the portals of formal learning? The aspirational status of English for an entry into the global economy and the claims of the IT industry notwithstanding, innumerable studies have been reminding us of the fact that after half a century of independence health and primary education for all have been our democracy's biggest failures. In stark contrast, a booming entertainment industry funded by private players in India and from abroad has ensured the 'option' of innumerable channels. Films and *filmy* entertainment along with animations (backed by corporate organizations) are like God — omniscient and omnipresent! The mobile phone — with its seemingly endless morphing into song bites, video games, camera and other recording devices, loops in and out of the internet — generates newer modes of audio-visual exchanges. (We in India have a larger number of people with access to mobile phones than to toilets.) The 'targeted audience' gets younger by the day.

Popular media — television, advertisements on hoardings and billboards, and the web, among others — should not/cannot be kept at bay, as our classroom observations show, and may be useful as a learning *resource*. But popular media can *never substitute* for learning, for their aims are inherently different: "Some, like advertising leaflets, are designed to persuade, while the main functions of newspapers, magazines and television are to entertain and inform."<sup>2</sup> Educators elsewhere in the world have been concerned about how to 're-purpose' or reconfigure popular media in order that they may enable conceptual development. No easy task.

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What role then do English textbooks, brought out by a government body, have in this larger context outlined above? How are teachers expected to transact them?

What do teachers themselves bring to the classrooms by way of a critical consciousness?

What are the processes that exist to support them? What are the constraints (regulatory and intangible) that they grapple with?

What does English mean to the teachers, the examiners and the policy makers?

---

These are some of the larger questions against which the micro-level understanding of texts emerges. Such analyses are, and have inevitably to be, an ongoing process, both for the three researchers who have undertaken this particular project and for those of us who have been ‘worrying over’ and acting on these issues for a large part of our working lives.

This study is also an attempt to explore in greater detail questions that came out of a collaborative project that involved three cities in three continents, on which we worked for over two years. “The Policy-Praxis Nexus in Delhi, Johannesburg and London English Classrooms: Teachers and the Textual Cycle” is a joint paper written with Snehlata Gupta, Carey Jewitt, Denise Newfield, Yvonne Reed and Pippa Stein — our anchor.<sup>3</sup> The case studies show local, specific inflections of what teachers are able to do within the constraints of the policy-praxis nexus and provide insights into how subject English is realized across three countries, each of which has a distinct social, historical and cultural relation to English.

Something by way of an insight into how the most hackneyed ‘textbook lesson’ can be transformed came from the boys of a state-run juvenile home in New Delhi.

I am indebted to one of my earliest students, Debashree Mukherjee, now a civil service officer, who made it possible for four students of my M.Phil. seminar on “Childhood, Pedagogy and Literary Forms” to interact with about two dozen of the boys of this particular home and to produce two ‘*nataks*’ at the end of two months. Performances that both the boys and their young mentors/comrades feel are part of the ongoing interaction and not an end. And I am indebted to my students — Debolina Dey, Radhika Baruah, Paromita Patranobish and Maitrayee Roychoudhury — for their deep and unswerving commitment to what began as their ‘group project’ (on “Precarious Childhoods”) but subsequently moved into a full-time involvement, emotionally and intellectually.

I cite some excerpts from their project report:

. . . one could argue that the models made available to them [the boys] through their access to television and textbook stories, are sites for construction of non-precarious identities, ones that signify power, action and dynamism (p. 3).

Our play which was titled “Sher Aur Khargosh: Ek Sapna” (Tiger meets Rabbit: A Dreamscape) was conceived out of conversations,

woven in with the various kinds of texts that *they had brought to us* — the lyrics of a song, stories from school books, anecdotes from everyday life, recollections of their pasts, their favourite Bollywood songs. . . The play was also the avenue through which our roles were reconfigured from being just passive recipients of their narratives, into becoming active participants in them (p. 7) (emphasis mine).

The relationship between the form of the message and the children's interest became evident in the way their attention was affirmatively fixed on to the song "bam bam bole" from the film *Tare Zameen Par*. This song about the possibilities of thinking out of the box, ultimately got integrated into the play as its theme. . .

. . . and it was refreshing to see that these movements were not an imitation of Bollywood dances but their own interpretation of the song (p. 9).

"Billi Mausi Chali Padhane" (Aunt Kitty Goes A-Teaching) emerged from a half-remembered school text and some creative brainstorming with our team. . . Though vaguely sourced from a *Panchatantra* story, the play became a creative hybrid that allowed each child the opportunity to display his imaginative powers, to script a self he could relate to. . . The playing out of the rabbit and wolf scene as well as the final scene that results in the death of the treacherous cat shocked us initially because we were unaccustomed to the display of such naked aggression. . . Disturbing insights apart, we also discovered the boys' naturally affectionate dispositions (p. 26).

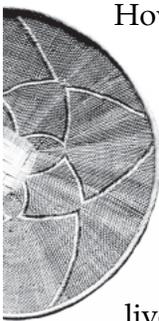
I suppose I would have to cite the entire report to suggest how even the limited exposure of the boys to standard *Panchatantra* stories from their textbooks and the relentless images of popular films turned into something else.

This was possible only through the course of mutually enriching interaction. The performances that we finally saw were imbued with each boy's subjectivity and aspiration. There was the sheer joy of performance, along with all the hard work and frustrations that all performance entails.

Perhaps then, at the beginning of every school session too, a potentially performative text can be worked over and re-conceptualized through interactive sessions with the class for a performance at the end. Not as a 'ready-made' play, but a play always in the making!

On another note, there are the levels of pure research too. Rama Kant Agnihotri's almost lone voice, urging us for over a quarter of a century to develop multilinguality as a classroom resource, finds resonance in more recent research which shows conclusively how the colonial interlude marks a definitive break in multilingual interpretative traditions in northeastern India.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, there are studies showing the actual displacement of multilingual *textbooks* with monolingual ones in the Deccan region.<sup>5</sup> A colleague from Bhubhaneshwar (Jatindra Naik of Utkal University), who has been running an organisation called "Shikshyasandhan" and has a collection of primers from the turn of the 20th century, tells me about the highly popular *tribashi* or trilingual primers still being produced (and consumed, one would imagine) which move between Oriya, English and Hindi. Most recently, an innovative publication exercise conceptualized by Nasreen Munni Kabir has seen the emergence of the screenplay of classic Bombay films from the 1950s, with four sets of scripts/languages on facing pages. The original dialogue is transcribed in Urdu, Devanagari and Roman scripts, with an English translation!<sup>6</sup> What existed in the past in formal education and still does in popular culture, and is a part of our everyday life, has somehow been completely exorcised from our textbooks.

In many of its own habitations (e.g. in the UK) English is experiencing a new wave of exposure to innumerable languages through immigration flows. It is argued that "Those who speak English *alongside* other languages will outnumber first language speakers and, increasingly, will decide the global future of the language" (emphasis mine).<sup>7</sup>



How do we bring many languages back into our monolingual textbooks?

How do we make the multilingual classroom speak without fears of censorship?

How do we make our entire teaching-learning system, whether at the primary or the doctoral level, more responsive to our lived experiences?

Because of demanding teaching and administrative schedules, added to the strain of long commutes, this first phase of the textbook project was completed under

some pressure. Keen as they have been on their individual projects, members of the two projects did not, unfortunately, find the time to interact in any depth with each others' work. Or, indeed, to try out their alternative texts and songs with children over any extended period of time. If they do so, even at a later date, the exchanges are bound to be fruitful in unexpected ways.

These reflections (which I rather arbitrarily cut off here) may no more than provoke questions across a range of usually segregated disciplines and spaces, within and without ourselves. Moving beyond the specific textbook, one may at least mark out tracks for future interrogation. . . .

Rimli Bhattacharya

#### Notes

1. Rimli Bhattacharya, Prachee Dewri, Kristina Z. Zama, Padmakshi Patowary and Aditi Chand, "Sur Pippa: Songs in Many Tongues: Lullabies and Play Songs in Asamiya, Mizo and Kumaoni, with translations into English." Research project housed by Eklavya under a grant from Sir Ratan Tata Trust, 2008-09.
2. Carol Bertram, Peter Ranby et al, in John Gultig (ed.), *Using Media in Teaching: Learning Guide*. Cape Town: South African Institute of Distance Education and Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 181 ff.
3. Rimli Bhattacharya et al, *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 3 (September 2007), pp. 465-85.
4. Bodhisattva Kar, "Tongue Has No Bone: Fixing the Assamese Language, c. 1800—c. 1930," *Studies in History*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2008), pp. 27-76.
5. Lisa Mitchell has written on modes of vernacularisation prevalent in the Deccan region in the mid-nineteenth century. *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother Tongue*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.
6. See Nasreen Munni Kabir, "Concept, Introduction, Translation and Commentary," in *The Dialogue of Mother India: Mehbhoob Khan's Immortal Classic*. Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2010.
7. David Graddol, *The Future of English: A Guide to Forecasting the Popularity of the English Language in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. London: The British Council, 1997, p. 10.

. . . And education too is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us. . .

Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future:*  
*Eight Exercises in Political Thought*

# Introduction

When Rimli Bhattacharya offered us the opportunity to do a research project on children's literature, we were unanimous in our desire to work on English textbooks published by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). In retrospect, we might speculate why we thought of literature in tandem with English textbooks for school children.

We had just started our careers as teachers of English Literature in various colleges of Delhi University. For the first time, we were interacting *as teachers* with students fresh out of school. The diverse range of students who we daily met possessed rich inner resources — imagination, curiosity, analytical abilities, information — but we found that their schooling and, possibly, their home environments had managed to systematically stifle their confidence in themselves. They had moved from school to college, but their mental paradigms had not changed. They continued to rely on the teacher for the 'correct' or most authoritative interpretation. They also resisted reading or discussing more than what they thought was absolutely necessary for being successful in examinations. Literature, as we know, nurtures questioning, makes us think imaginatively, and offers a multiplicity of interpretations.

Why, we wondered, had all this potential somehow been suppressed in a large part of the student population? How did this reflect on our role as teachers? To what extent did the school textbook enable or disable a more positive role in engaging with literature?

## **Textbook Culture**

We know of course about the pervasive textbook culture of India in which the textbook is the paramount authority. Krishna Kumar has argued persuasively that the aim of the colonial education system was to create a middle class that would serve the interests of the government, and acculturate the Indian youth in

European attitudes. The primacy of the textbook and examinations successfully took away autonomy from teachers, who were burdened with administrative duties. Simultaneously, students developed a competitive spirit and a sense of inferiority when they could not conform to the rigid norms of ‘success.’ Unfortunately, our contemporary educational system continues to carry forward these burdens.<sup>1</sup> Till such time that we can completely rework the entire education system at the primary level, the textbook demands our attention.

In many state-funded schools, teachers and learners still have limited or no access to computers, photocopiers or libraries. In such schools, textbooks — though these are not always available in sufficient quantity — unavoidably become the sole resource for teaching and learning English as an additional language. Often they represent the only English literature that students are exposed to. Their scarcity makes them a precious resource. For children from underprivileged backgrounds, the textbook may be one of their few material possessions or even the only book in their homes.

Given these ground realities, the textbook’s impact is massive, as are its possibilities. Creative textbooks have the potential to work as an enabling space for students and teachers. Of course, their final impact is complemented by other factors such as dedicated, trained teachers, flexibility in class schedules and a less exam-oriented approach. Our analysis of the NCERT textbooks and our sections on ‘alternative approaches’ are intended to affirm the resource represented by the textbook.

### **Recent Education Policies and NCERT Textbooks**

Recent education policies have given us hope for change in this regard. The 2005 NCERT Focus Group Position Papers and the National Curriculum Framework (henceforth referred to as NFG and NCF respectively) argued for the need to integrate children’s lives outside school with their experiences in school, to counter “the legacy of bookish learning that continues to shape our system and cause a gap between the school, home and community.”<sup>2</sup> Revised syllabi and textbooks, issued by NCERT in 2006, were to implement the shifts in perspectives and aims that these documents had articulated. We were keen to study how these goals had been translated in the textbooks and in classrooms.

We have used the term ‘subject English’ to mean English as a subject that is taught in the school curriculum. Gunther Kress defines the term as

a number of curricula around which the English teacher has to construct some plausible principles of coherence. It is first, a curriculum of

communication...via its teaching around English language...It is second, a curriculum of sociality and culture...English is also a curriculum of values, taste, and aesthetics. Here the study of canonical texts is crucial, particularly their valuation in relation to texts of popular culture.<sup>3</sup>

Studying subject English in the current Indian context requires an engagement with its perception as an important status symbol, as well as its having become an increasingly indispensable qualification in the job market. Students who are not proficient in the language often feel insecure and, in varying degrees, powerless. An important question that needs to be engaged with is: How do students themselves perceive and perhaps express the relationship between language, power and identity?

### **Usage and Perception of NCERT Textbooks**

CBSE affiliated schools across India have the choice of using any publisher's textbooks for all subjects till Class VIII, after which they have to use books issued by NCERT. In Delhi, we found that NCERT English textbooks are used only by government schools for Classes I to VIII.

The majority of private schools in Delhi use books by publishers like Oxford and Cambridge. When we asked a few private school teachers and school-books suppliers for the reason, we were told that the standard of the English in the NCERT textbooks was 'poor.' Subsequently we found the level of the NCERT English textbooks to be less challenging compared to the books issued by Oxford and Cambridge for the same classes. The study calls for a comparison between these different textbooks; but we have not been able to deal with this aspect due to time constraints.

We chose to analyze the NCERT Marigold English Textbooks for Classes III, IV and V because these classes mark an important transition in language teaching. We might assume a more active and self-conscious involvement with literature from Class III onwards. Of course children in Classes I and II would equally enjoy playing with language, sound and rhythm. Unfortunately, we rarely come across activities at any stage of the primary education process which consciously experiment with the entire range of sound, gesture and movement.

## Issues

Our study seeks to address the following questions and concerns:

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How do the NCF and NFG conceptualize and position subject English within primary school education?

How do the textbooks translate the principles and assumptions of the recent educational policies?

What are the pedagogical practices that are being foregrounded in the teaching of English literature? Does the pedagogical positioning of English allow the space for imagination, mediation and independent thinking on the part of the child?

What are the other spaces — real or virtual — in which a child engages with literature, and how are these different (if at all) from the space of the formal learning environment?

Are the textbooks visually appealing? Is there a sense of harmony and proportion in their presentation? Are the illustrations likely to give a fresh perspective on the texts, and enhance the children's curiosity?

What is the conception of the 'literary' in these textbooks? In what ways is the English language able to evoke interest, curiosity and pleasure for the readers?

What are the alternative approaches that we can envisage working with the same texts/themes?

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During the initial stages of the project we had also proposed to investigate the policy documents and provide an overarching perspective on how children's literature is conceptualized in English textbooks. Some questions we had thought of discussing were:

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What are the underlying orientations and principles behind the idea of children's literature?

What are the processes via which literature is transformed into the space of the textbooks?

Is there a principle of selection of texts? Is there a kind of canon being constructed through these textbooks?

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These questions deserve an extended consideration in a long-term project; here, they inform the ways in which we have approached our present study.

### **Modalities**

We sought to address the issues outlined above through:

1. An analysis of Class III-V textbooks' negotiation with the NCF and NFG, and a critical microanalysis of selected sections of these textbooks. By microanalysis we mean that we have analyzed some texts in detail, even while addressing concerns that emerge out of a broader framework of analysis.
2. Visits to schools\* to observe and study the dissemination processes of subject English in the classroom, and students' responses to the textbooks.

### **Language and the 'Literary'**

We have worked on this project from our vantage point as students and teachers of literature. Inevitably, we have sought to engage with the question of the literary. In our view, the 'literary' entails exploring the language/s of the text beyond grammar drills — the sound of different words, how rhyme and rhythm work, the play of meanings in small phrases, the emotions latent in words, and how narrative or drama can be created through the arrangement and sequencing of sentences. The literary is not *outside* the social; rather, at its best it alerts us to the obvious and hidden ways in which we experience the world, its beauty and its injustices. This need not happen only through 'messages' but in more subtle, deeper modes of understanding and reflection.

All this and more!

According to us, subject English should and can impart pleasure to the students and urge the child to develop an interest in reading further, instead of being associated with difficulty and failure. It should open up imaginative worlds for her to inhabit and express. It should build up her confidence in her inner resources, and activate the mind to learn and create, rather than dull it through mindless repetition.

---

\* Kendriya Vidyalaya, Sadiq Nagar, and Rajakiya Pratibha Vikas Vidyalaya, Shamnath Marg, Delhi. Both are government schools affiliated to the CBSE.

The relationship between literature and language also needs to be discussed in the light of a recent spate of new courses like Business Communication, Business English and Professional Communication in English offered in universities across India to make students 'globally equipped.' These are primarily language courses focused on the forms of communication that would be used in a corporate workplace. They perpetuate the binary between language and literature, as one being useful and the other fanciful.

We were keen to find out if there was interplay between language learning and literature in the textbooks we were studying. Our report is divided into three sections:

**Policy-Praxis Negotiations** deals with the implementation of the latest educational policies in the textbooks.

**Microanalysis and Alternative Approaches** presents a microanalysis of selected sections of the textbooks. It also incorporates alternative approaches to the texts that have been studied.

**Classroom Observations** records individual project members' observations on the transactions of the textbooks in two government schools in Delhi.

The Afterword has Rimli Bhattacharya's and Anuja Madan's closing thoughts on possible workshop scenarios that would flesh out the questions and concepts discussed in our other chapters.

#### *Notes*

1. Krishna Kumar, "Textbooks and Educational Culture," in *What is Worth Teaching*. Delhi: Orient Longman, 1992, pp. 23-39.
2. NCERT Director's Foreword to all NCERT textbooks published in 2006.
3. Gunther Kress et al, *English in Urban Classrooms: A Multimodal Perspective on Teaching and Learning*. Oxon: Routledge, 2005, pp. 17-18.

## Policy-Praxis Negotiations

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) was established in 1961 as “an autonomous organization. . .by the Government of India to assist and advise the Central and State Governments on policies and programmes for qualitative improvement in school education.”<sup>1</sup>

Such a self-definition locates the NCERT as a major medium of state influence on education in the country at various levels of the system. Its policies, syllabi and textbooks play an important role in the conceptualization of school subjects and the teaching of these. Revision of syllabi for different school subjects is a part of NCERT’s regular function and responsibilities, in keeping with its major objective of acting as a research organization dedicated to educational reform and modernization of school curriculum.

During the last decade, a great deal of discussion on epistemological and pedagogical issues relevant for reform strategies has been taking place. Eminent scholars and educationists have been debating the nature of knowledge, its transmission, and problems of school education. After the Ministry of Human Resource Development gave a directive to revise the National Curriculum Framework in 2004, the NCERT initiated deliberations on syllabi and pedagogical reform, the products of which are the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and the NCERT National Focus Group Position Papers (NFG), published in 2005.<sup>2</sup> People from a cross section of disciplines from across the country participated. These documents have been seen as instrumental in articulating a shift in educational policies.

We have studied these policies (with a focus on those dealing with language teaching) in conjunction with the most recent NCERT English textbooks for Classes III - V in order to explore the ways in which the aims and perspectives of the former have been negotiated in the latter.

Our analysis of the textbooks’ implementation of the policy documents has focused on the issues of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Multilingualism/

multilinguality is crucial as an approach to English language teaching and learning in India. 'Multicultural education' has become increasingly popular in Western countries, especially in the U.S. The term 'multiculturalism' has gained prominence in India over the last decade. We examine the implications of these approaches, whether articulated explicitly or implicitly, in the policy documents and textbooks. The following sections deal with these themes separately, but we would like to emphasize that they are deeply interlinked.

### **Multilingualism in NCERT Textbooks**

India is characterized by both societal and individual bi/multilingualism. The constitution recognizes 22 official regional languages, but there are several hundred languages that are extant in the country. According to the 2001 census, 29 languages in the country are spoken by more than a million native speakers, and 122 by more than 10,000. No linguistic survey of India gives an exact count of the myriad tribal and minority languages spoken in this vast country.<sup>3</sup>

Lachman Khubchandani points out that pre-colonial India's education system, working through *pathshalas* and *maktabs*, regarded school education as an extension of primary socialization and promoted a chain of mutually intelligible speech varieties ranging from local dialects to highbrow styles. Several functionally oriented languages and scripts equipped the learner with a rich and fluid linguistic repertoire.<sup>4</sup> Uncomfortable with the traditional linguistic heterogeneity of India, the colonial rulers proposed monistic solutions to Indian education, creating an opposition between English and the vernaculars.<sup>5</sup>

Persuasive research has been done to show the importance of multilingualism in primary education. Rama Kant Agnihotri recommends that one language should be used to develop others so that they all become part of a child's thinking, feeling and articulating processes. That would lend to increasing confidence levels in children besides catering to their growth as concerned and sensitive members of the national and international community.<sup>6</sup> According to Anup K. Singh, knowledge of different languages creates for a greater sensitization to the world around, adjustability, problem solving skills and conflict resolution skills in an individual.<sup>7</sup>

In cognizance of India's linguistic diversity, and the need for a multilingual approach to language learning, the Union Education Ministry enunciated the 3-language formula in the 1968 National Policy Resolution. This provided that children in non Hindi-speaking states are to be taught the state's local language along with

English and Hindi, while children in Hindi-speaking states are to be taught English, Hindi and one south Indian language. Certain Articles in the constitution support the mother tongue as the initial medium of education.<sup>8</sup> However, these policies have not been implemented evenly.

Both the NCF and NFG emphasize the importance of a multilingual approach towards language teaching. According to the NCF, “the three-language formula needs to be implemented in its spirit, promoting multilingual communicative abilities for a multilingual country.” The goal is not to learn three languages in isolation, as disparate subjects to be studied only for purposes of fluency and grammatical correctness. Instead, a rich interaction between all languages is hoped for. It professes that “the aim of English teaching should be the creation of multilinguals who can enrich all our languages.”<sup>9</sup> The position papers articulate similar views.

Since the colonial period, English has had associations of cultural superiority and exclusiveness. The NCF and NFG seek to counter the hegemonic status that English has acquired. Both documents reiterate that every possible effort is needed to empower the languages of the marginalized and underprivileged sections of society.

Multilingualism would counter the loss of one’s own languages, and it would counter the perceived hegemony of English. A multilingual approach would also counter the ethnocentrism, and particularist loyalties that are associated with one dominant language.<sup>10</sup>

Diversity of cultures and languages is emphasized and actively sought to be nurtured. The aspiration is to

. . . harness multilingual skills of children in learning English and build an awareness of different cultural registers so that learning English can truly become a wholesome, empowering process rather than a simplistic infusion of grammatical knowledge and comprehension skills. The idea then is to make English as much a part of a child’s thought and creative processes as is his mother tongue or other languages he is familiar with. English is therefore not to be treated as an exclusive entity.<sup>11</sup>

The textbooks are to be contextually rich, and provide suitable challenges to the creativity of the learners. They are to make students sensitive towards surroundings, people and different cultures, and to provide space for the exploration of different themes and languages.

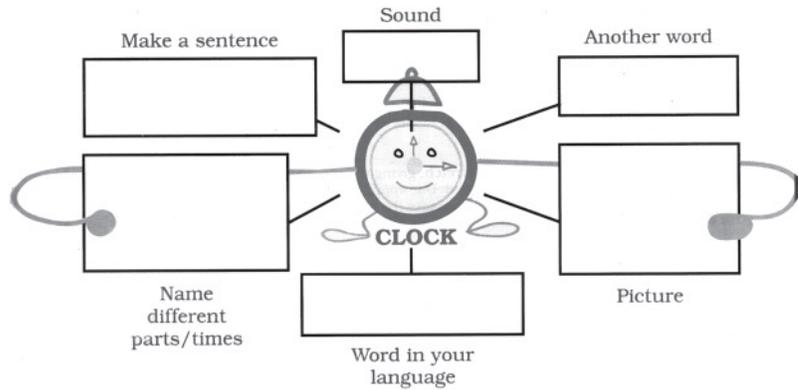
In spite of the well-articulated aims of these documents, the textbooks that we have studied hardly provide the means or guidelines for engaging in any meaningful way with different languages.

*Marigold Textbook in English for Class III* does not deal with the issue at all while only one among ten units in Textbook V states multilingualism as the theme. In Textbook IV, there are arbitrary and disconnected attempts to acknowledge different linguistic registers.

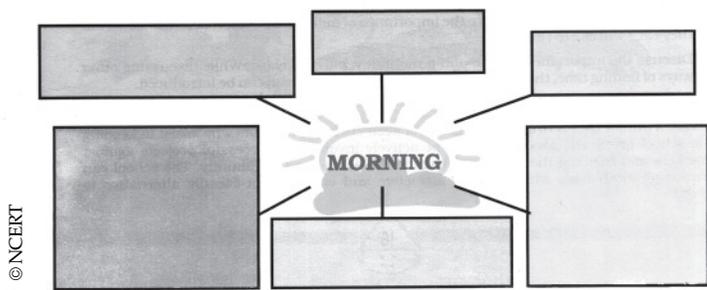
For instance, Unit 1 of Textbook IV deals with the themes “the importance of time” and “appreciating nature.” An exercise that asks students to “write down words relating to clock” includes “a word in your language for clock.” (15) After this sole exercise in vocabulary, it is only in Unit 7 that there is an attempt at multilingualism in the Akbar-Birbal story titled “The Scholar’s Mother Tongue”. (118-20)\* The story narrates how Birbal figured out the mother tongue of a pundit who was fluent in many languages by provoking him. At that point, the angry pundit instinctively switches to his mother tongue. Had this part been presented as a dialogue, it would have been entertaining. It could have initiated class discussion about mother tongues and children’s languages of feeling and thought. However, the third person narration dilutes the child’s interest in the story.



Here is a word, clock. Write down words relating to clock.



Here is a word, morning. Now write down words related to it.



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\* A note on our formatting: We have included the page numbers of the textbook chapters within the text, while all other references are provided in notes at the end of the chapters.

Another exercise “Lets Talk” at the end of the same chapter asks:

What is your mother tongue?

Tell the class a joke in your mother tongue? [*sic.*]

Do you know any other language? Do you know a joke in English? Tell your friends. (120)

Snehlata Gupta, an English teacher in a government school, and who has been part of textbook creation committees, believes it unlikely that abrupt and isolated exercises like the ones above could be productive means of linguistic exchange in the classroom. Inspection in government schools and yearly school reviews measure teaching quality by the percentage of students who have passed and the number of distinction holders. Thus, even the motivated teacher’s aim would be to equip her students with proficiency in answering stereotypical exam questions.<sup>12</sup> Very few teachers would therefore have the time to even gloss such exercises which would be perceived as being ‘extraneous’ to the examination-oriented agenda.

The pressure to complete the syllabus in time for the exam is compounded by the large class size in both government and non-elite private schools. Carrying out exercises like the ones above, which are premised on the teacher’s engagement with all students, is therefore unfeasible. Another factor for the teachers’ disinclination to go beyond what is necessary is the increasing amount of clerical and other administrative work they are burdened with.

Moreover, the overwhelming status of English in India has led to mother tongues being stigmatized by parents and teachers alike. Anvita Abbi, among others, has demonstrated that the use of the mother tongue in metropolitan cities like Delhi is becoming increasingly restricted.<sup>13</sup>

Our observations indicate that teachers need to be trained in a new language learning and language teaching methodology. Only if they recognize multilingualism as an asset, will they think of ways of creatively exploiting the different languages available in a given classroom.<sup>14</sup>

It would therefore be very fruitful if textbook makers could initiate teachers into awareness by providing supplemental materials. The Teacher’s Page (comprising of notes to the teacher on the previous unit) states the themes of Unit 7 of Marigold IV as “communication, mother tongue and multilingualism.” It suggests that the

teacher can use parallel texts in different languages and that “materials can be designed to promote multilingual activities.” (128) Given the constraints just outlined, the provision of sample parallel texts as attachments would increase the chances of these exercises actually being carried out as a preliminary step.

Fun time

**Crossword fun**

India is a country of many languages. Let's see if you know what the people of the states in this crossword puzzle speak. The clues are given below. The first letter of each answer has been filled in for you.

Across

1. This language is spoken in Orissa
2. It is spoken in Karnataka
4. The people of Assam speak this language
7. This language is used in Andhra Pradesh
8. You can hear this spoken in Maharashtra

Down

3. The people of Kerala speak this language
5. This is our national language
6. The language of the Goan people
7. This is spoken in Tamil Nadu
9. It is widely spoken in Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere

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Unit 7 has a crossword exercise that tests students' knowledge about the languages spoken in different states of the country. (126)

In metropolitan cities like Delhi and in the National Capital Region, people use a mixture of languages in their everyday life. A child in Class IV may not be ready for such complex tracking of linguistic patterns. But, does it help her to believe that languages have a one-to-one relationship with particular states or communities? Children are naturally multilingual, and in their familiar world can address different speakers in the language concerned without any instruction. Classes III to

V constitute an important developmental stage for the child's awareness of the world around herself. When the learning materials themselves are nuanced, students will gradually develop an alert and sensitive mind.

Such exercises also encourage learning by rote: the impression is that languages are not to be used beyond their state borders. How will this prepare the child to relate to the motley nature of life as it is in most places today? The child might develop a partitioned understanding of school and the real world, between textbooks and the texts she negotiates outside of school. This sadly defeats the aim of the NCF and NFG which argue against such compartmentalization.

In life, children (especially from urban and semi-urban backgrounds) negotiate a dizzying variety of texts in different languages outside the classroom: for example, newspapers, hoardings, and programmes on Cartoon Network or other TV channels which are now available in different languages. They are *already* actively participating in a multilingual environment. This fact has been recognized by the NCF and NFG. The textbook and the classroom can guide them to develop a political-social consciousness and grow creatively in such an environment. Even creating a sense of curiosity about other languages through familiarization within the classroom would expand the child's domain of exposure to and acceptance of difference.

Block definitions and blanket terms are limiting and dangerous, especially given the increasing trends of jingoism, sectarianism and communalism all over the world. It is very easy for children to develop watertight notions about cultures and communities. Therefore, for subject English to enhance thinking and creative faculties of children in contemporary times, 'multilingualism' cannot crop up in isolated chapters or as stray references in the textbook. It has to be woven into the textbooks and classroom interaction in such a way that it builds the groundwork for acceptance and appreciation of difference both inside and outside the classroom.

In our classroom experiences we came across primarily two pedagogical approaches in teaching English as a second language. One, wherein Anuja observed how Teacher Z in Class V had adopted English as the language of instruction and explanation while simultaneously teaching it as a subject. That is, she spoke only in English while also attempting to teach students new words and grammar rules for correct sentence construction in English. Sreyoshi, on the other hand, noted that Teacher Y in Class IV used *only* Hindi as the language of instruction and explanation. She never attempted to converse in English in class, nor were the students encouraged or challenged to speak in or write in English other than answer comprehension questions by simply reproducing sentences from the book chapters.

While the former teaching practice, by completely excluding discussions in other languages within the classroom, would indicate to the students that English is *the* desirable and valuable language which they must acquire in order to have some standing in this world, the latter practice implies that English is just another subject which must be learnt by rote or by whatever means necessary in order to pass the exams. Thus neither method does much to get students to take useful steps towards adopting the new language for purposes of expression and articulation in their everyday lives. Also, if students from Teacher Y's class go onto Teacher Z's class,

they will be absolutely at a loss to grasp the content of the class conversation because they have not been encouraged at all, either by their previous class textbook or by the teacher, to articulate their own thoughts in English.

Given the above, we believe that it is of utmost importance that in 'learning' subject English students be encouraged to compose sentences, essays, poems, stories etc. above and beyond those available in the textbook. Encouraging them to articulate in English their lived experiences in school and outside of it and their interests (such as a favourite TV show or video game) would help them develop familiarity and confidence in using the new language. This is because if the content of the class conversation is located in the familiar or has to do with whatever is interesting and relevant in the child's world, it will lead to a willing exertion on the part of the child in finding the right words in the new language and stringing together in the right way to form a meaningful sentence. She will *want* to get her meaning across; and language learning will become more fun and desirably challenging in the classroom and at home.

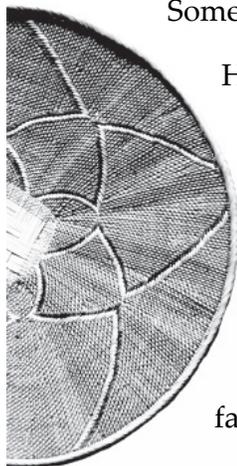
In the process outlined above, both teacher and student might initially need their mother tongue or languages they are more conversant in. The language would function as a stepping stone in explaining meanings or to clarify an understanding of sentence structure. Intermittent use of another language must not be discouraged since it is a necessary part of the acquisition of a new language. Students will probably speak and compose in English at times through direct translation from languages that are more familiar. While such articulations might not make for 'correct English', we believe that what is of essence in such articulations is the very effort to purposefully engage with the new, learnt language. Given the present apathy towards or overvaluation of English in the classroom, in both Marigold textbooks and in pedagogy, we believe that, despite initial derailments, what is important at this stage (i.e. Classes III - V) in children's education is a certain comfort on the part of the students with extra-textual articulations and compositions in English. Further, even a couple of sessions in class where the teacher is able to explain to the students why a direct translation of a word or sentence from mother tongue to English does not work, will be useful towards sensitizing the students to nuances of different linguistic and cultural registers. This would work even better if routed through something the students are familiar with: e.g. short poems, lullabies, film dialogues or even brand logos. Such an exercise would not only make for language learning but would also enhance student sensibilities to the aesthetics specific to different languages.

### Treatment of Pluralism in NCERT Textbooks

The NCF places a lot of emphasis on 'inclusive education'. The Executive Summary mentions that the aims of the document are based on the "Constitutional Vision of India as a secular, egalitarian and pluralistic society, founded on the values of social justice and equality."<sup>15</sup> Yash Pal writes in the Foreword: "I was struck by the frequency of words like 'pluralism,' 'equity' and 'equality' in our discussions...I believe this came out because we were led to a conviction that our strength lies in the presently deprived three-fourths of our people."<sup>16</sup>

The NCF has a two-pronged approach to the issue of pluralism in the textbooks and schools. At one level, it advises that "curricular content must meaningfully incorporate experiences of children and their diverse cultural contexts, including languages."<sup>17</sup> At another, "schools must be conscious of the importance of creating equitable classroom environments in which students are not subjected to unfair treatment or denied opportunities on the basis of their sex, or membership of a caste, tribe or minority group."<sup>18</sup> Thus teaching materials and school environments are to celebrate the pluralistic nature of Indian society as well as to "remove social, physical and attitudinal barriers"<sup>19</sup> and consciously create gender and societal equity. Equitable classroom environments and materials must also include an inclusion of children with physical disabilities or learning difficulties.

In an extremely heterogeneous society like ours, achieving these aims in a meaningful way is surely challenging. Diane Hoffman and Chris McCarthy are among many sociologists and educators who have pointed out that frequently the obsessive concern with culture masks the political and socio-economic conditions that contribute to real inequity in contemporary plural societies, thus making 'multiculturalism' a safe way of sidestepping the important issues.



Some crucial questions that arise in this context are:

How may diversity be treated in materials and the classroom?

In what ways can we create the notion of a community in classrooms?

How can learning materials and the classroom environment bridge the gap between equity as an ideal and the experience of inequity that many students face (at various levels) in their everyday lives?

Textbook V is the only one among the Marigold books we are studying which deals with the issue of diverse cultures in any detail. It does so by including three regional folktales: “Bamboo Curry” — a Santhal folk tale; “Avial” — a Kerala folk tale; and “Who will be Ningthou?” — a Manipuri folktale.

Does this inclusion serve to attain the objective of representing a diverse Indian society? Multiculturalism seems to be operating as an agenda that the textbook needs to fulfil. Marigold’s understanding of this issue makes us wonder if a *quantitative* representation of marginal communities achieves the aim of sensitizing students to cultural differences. What might make for a more fruitful approach that informs the text as a whole?

Discussing the problems of ‘multicultural education’ in the context of the USA, Diane Hoffman writes that there is a tendency to articulate views of culture that ignore the reality of fuzzy borders and mutual interface and interdependency:

Such views of culture are, paradoxically, essentialist in their reduction of cultures to categories of otherness and universalist in their assumption of unspecified fundamental humanity/commonality. They neglect the broad middle ground that lies somewhere between universals and absolute difference.<sup>20</sup>

Such a critique holds good for the NCERT English textbooks’ approach to culture. The Teacher’s Pages of Units 1 and 10 ask the teacher to read folk tales from “other parts” of the country in class. Folk tales *are* a good way of introducing students to different cultures and may be pleasurable. But the attempt to sensitize children to cultural differences (and similarities) needs to be more comprehensive. How can these tales become one’s own arena of expression?

A few exercises attempt to do just that. After a short story on how *avial* (a mixed vegetable dish) originated in Kerala, the ‘Find Out’ activity asks students to name food items that are made in their homes on different occasions and to share the information with their classmates. The exercise also asks students to write down the recipe of a dish similar to *avial* that is made in their community, and present it to the class on the notice board. (15) However, the exercises do not move beyond the aspect of food, in the process almost making food a marker of difference. Both the stories included in this unit are about specific food items from Jharkhand and Kerala. The Teacher’s Page asks her to discuss the theme of “multicultural approaches to food”, without explicating what multicultural approaches might mean! (19)

The equation of culture *exclusively* with food, festivals or languages leads students to see 'culture' as a set of facts or identity markers. They may feel *informed* about certain facts, but are not made aware about the views and deeper underpinnings that make cultures distinctive. While factual information about different cultures is important, it can only be the first step. What we need to ask ourselves is: How should 'difference' be made to contribute to children's consciousness? How should students learn about the fluidity of cultures and their mutual influence even while valuing difference?

The Manipuri folktale "Who Will be Ningthou?" offers scope for wider debate on various issues. It is about a king and queen who choose their environment-conscious daughter to be the future queen of the kingdom rather than her three elder brothers who have displayed insensitivity to Nature.

On the Teacher's Page, one of the themes of this unit is stated as multilingualism. (186) One exercise asks students to translate some Manipuri words used in the chapter to English. Another asks them to translate aloud terms in Manipuri which

### Find Out

1. Name food that is made in your home
  - (i) for a feast/ festival.
  - (ii) when you are unwell.
  - (iii) everyday.

Share the information with your friends.

2. *Avial* is a dish made in Kerala.

Do you have a similar dish in your state made from a mix of many vegetables?

- ▶ What is it called? \_\_\_\_\_
- ▶ Note down the ingredients used to make it.
- ▶ Write down the recipe.
- ▶ Present attractively and display on the class board. You can draw and stick pictures too.



have been explained in the story in their own mother tongues. One exercise quizzes students about the language and the location of Manipur.

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These exercises are potentially very interesting and might yield productive results. A discussion (albeit in an accessible language) could also be initiated about how communities have varied patriarchal and matriarchal structures. Students could be asked to comment on rituals associated with Nature in their extended families, and then about their own attitudes towards some of these practices, *including instances of conflict or confusion*. Many units could provoke students to wonder about the influence of cultures on one's own views and habits, and to discover the co-relatedness of cultures as well as the deeply internalized prejudices we hold about both the familiar and the unfamiliar world. Traversing such a range might enable children to have a more internalized and participatory understanding of this rather nebulous concept.

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In sensitizing children to the pluralistic and diverse fabric of our country, images are arguably more influential than words. The majority of illustrations depict fair children, a few brown-skinned, while there are hardly any who have very dark skin. This reinforces a certain hegemonic perception of north India. One wonders why the textbooks do not reflect the heterogeneity that one sees everyday on the street, whether in a small town or in a metropolis. Representations of people from different regions and religions may be made distinctive through their facial features, skin colour, costumes and religious markers. At the same time, the kind of 'sameness' that globalization and urbanization bring about in our attire and so on could also be represented. Apart from the three folktales discussed above, where the illustrations attempt to etch out the characteristic facial features and the dress of those regions' inhabitants, portrayals of Indians in the textbooks are rather homogenous. Thus, a norm is implicitly created, from which many child readers may feel excluded.

Children in the illustrations seem to belong only to middle class/upper middle class backgrounds. Girls and boys wear matching t-shirts with short skirts and shorts respectively; the latter occasionally sport fashionable hats and jackets. They

**Teacher's Page**
**UNIT 10**

*Poem: Malu Bhalu*  
*Story: Who will be Ningthou?*

**THEMES**  
Girl child – gender awareness  
Multi-lingualism  
Leadership qualities

**READING TIME**  
The story in this unit is a folk tale from Manipur and has many words in Manipuri language. Children could be asked to read folk tales from other states of India and make note of any words in another language.

**CONVERSATION TIME**  
The caring child and sensitivity to the environment is also highlighted in the story. The teacher could draw out from the children what made Sanatombi the right choice for the *Leima* and why is it important to care for the environment. They could be asked to find out and share with others which actions on our part harm the environment.

**WRITING TIME**  
Students should be guided to write short paragraphs in a systematic way. The teacher can give some clues on how to put the points in order — starting with a brief introduction, a topic sentence followed by the points, and then a proper ending sentence. A variety of topics can be given for practice.

**PROJECT WORK**  
A display board can be put up on famous personalities.



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play games like jigsaw puzzles, basketball and relay race, which might be uncommon among underprivileged children due to lack of resources. Many illustrations show children eating breakfast with sophisticated cutlery or studying at a desk with a table lamp, suggesting a standard of living beyond the means of the average Indian family.

Here, we may pause to ask: Should textbooks reflect the reality of the majority of their readers' lives? Or, are they bound also to reflect the aspirational states of their readers?

Given the reach of NCERT textbooks across the country and the heterogeneity of their readers, striking a balance between the two, though difficult, would be most desirable.

The NCF's aim of discouraging discrimination based on difference is perhaps even more challenging than the aim of representing pluralism. A theme of Unit 2 in Textbook III is "Differences and disabilities in nature". The text is about the sensitivity of a young girl to two fledgling sparrows. The Teacher's Page asks the teacher to "talk about differences with reference to children with special needs, e.g., visually handicapped or physically challenged" [sic] and "discuss how such children can excel in other fields like music, art, etc." (22) This might be a challenging task since the text itself does not deal with 'difference', but rather, sensitivity to Nature.

Unit 5 in Textbook IV has a short essay on Helen Keller. A list of signs for the letters of the alphabet is provided and an exercise on sign language follows. "Respecting differences" is one of the themes of this unit. The Teacher's Page mentions that "opportunities need to be given to all children and their specific abilities need to be recognized and appreciated." (90)



What more could be done with this material to de-segregate the issues?

How might more *exercises* throughout the textbook continue to raise these questions in implicit ways?

The NFG position paper on the teaching of English does not provide guidelines on how the NCF's aim of encouraging pluralism may be fruitfully translated in the English classroom or textbooks, though it does do so for the objective of multilingualism. It emphasizes the importance of "input-rich communicational environments" and recommends the use of parallel, multilingual texts in the English classroom. It also recognizes that ongoing teacher training is required for improvement in the situation. However, as discussed earlier, given the current primacy of the textbook, we need to pay greater attention to the finer nuances, the implications of the texts, exercises, images and format of the textbook.

The Marigold English textbooks take some much-needed steps towards fulfilling the vision of the policy documents. However, they also underscore for us the need to develop a more in-depth, comprehensive and creative approach to the issues discussed above in order for textbooks to be truly effective catalysts for change.

## Notes

1. "About NCERT," *All India School Education Survey*, National Informatics Centre, 2007. <http://aisens.nic.in/aboutncert>. 31 October 2008.
2. The NCF was developed by the National Steering Committee, chaired by Yash Pal. NFG groups were chaired by different scholars and practitioners.
3. An ambitious new project, the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), is set to answer this fundamental question by 2015.
4. Quoted in R.K. Agnihotri, "India: Multilingual Perspectives," in Nigel T. Crawhall (ed.), *Democratically Speaking: International Perspectives On Language Planning*. Salt River, Cape Town: National Language Project, 1992, p. 46.
5. R.K. Agnihotri, "India: Multilingual Perspectives," *ibid.*, p. 46.
6. R.K. Agnihotri, "Multilingualism as a Classroom Resource," in K. Heugh, A. Sieruhn and P. Pluddemann (eds.), *Multilingual Education for South Africa*. Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1995, pp. 3-7.
7. Anup K. Singh, "Languages, Employability and Decision Making." Paper presented in the conference on Multilingualism, Intercultural Dialogue and Globalization. European Commission et al. Delhi University Conference Centre, Delhi, 11-12 December 2008.
8. Articles 345, 347, 350 A. According to Article 350A, "It shall be the endeavour of every State and of every local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups."
9. National Steering Committee, *National Curriculum Framework 2005*. Delhi: National Council of Educational Research and Training, December 2005, pp.37-39. <http://www.ncert.nic.in/rightside/links/pdf/framework/english/nf2005.pdf>. November 2008.
10. *National Focus Group Position Papers (on the Aims of Education, Teaching of English Curriculum, Syllabus and Textbooks, Executive Summary)*. Delhi: National Council of Educational Research and Training, December 2005, p. 1. [http://www.ncert.nic.in/new\\_ncert/ncert/rightside/links/pdf/focus\\_group/executive\\_summary.pdf](http://www.ncert.nic.in/new_ncert/ncert/rightside/links/pdf/focus_group/executive_summary.pdf). November 2008.
11. NCF, p. 45.
12. Snehlata Gupta. Personal Interview. 22 November 2008.
13. Anvita Abbi, "Multilingual Education in Phases: Questioning the Three Language Formula." Paper presented in the conference on Multilingualism, Intercultural Dialogue and Globalization. European Commission et al. Delhi University Conference Centre, Delhi, 11-12 December 2008.
14. R.K. Agnihotri, "Multilingualism as a Classroom Resource," *op. cit.*, p. 6.
15. NCF, p. viii.
16. NCF, p. iv.
17. NCF, p. 121.
18. NCF, p. 83.
19. NCF, p. 84.
20. Diane Hoffman, "Culture and Self in Multicultural Education: Reflections on Discourse, Text and Practice." *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 33, no. 3 (Autumn 1996), p. 554.

## Microanalysis and Alternative Approaches

Next morning, she knitted a book,  
And took them to school, to take a look.  
The teachers, well, they did laugh and scoff,  
“Those kids are knitted, you’d best be off.  
We don’t teach children made of wool,  
Take them away, the class is full.”

Uri Orlov, *Granny Knits*

This section consists of our microanalyses of selected chapters of the Marigold textbooks. We have commented on their presentation and format, their lucidity and appeal for child readers, and the likely directions in which the child is led to think about the texts via the exercises.

Each Marigold book has 10 units, each unit usually comprising two chapters. The chapters may be of different genres. Each unit is built around one or more central themes and these themes are clearly articulated on the Teacher’s Page with which all the units end. There are exercises of 3-5 pages (depending on the class) at the end of each text, appearing under various categories most of which we have listed below. Some of these exercises are specific to Class IV or V.

As we can see, in our list of exercises on the following page, the exercises are varied in nature and draw on a range of capabilities and interests. The effort that has gone into the creation of these textbooks is commendable on several scores. There is a conscious effort to use more illustrations than in the earlier sets of textbooks and to include themes that may relate to children’s experiences or interest them. The themes of units include: “Games and play”, “Differences and disabilities in nature”, “Problems of growing up”, “Familiarity with reading maps”, “Awareness of different kinds of

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<i>Marigold Exercise Rubric</i>	<i>Focus</i>
"Reading is Fun" and "Let's Read"	ask questions about the text
"Let's Talk"	asks children to discuss their experiences/ routines etc., often in groups
"Let's Write" and "Think and Write"	test grammar or have general writing exercises
"Say Aloud"	centres around pronunciation
"Let's Listen"	plays with sounds
"Find out and Write a Report", "Fun Time" and "Let's Play"	have different activities like games, spaces for children to colour, story making exercises etc.
"Word Building", "Vocabulary Building" and "Fun with New Words"	familiarize students with new words
"Comprehension"	has a passage unrelated to the chapter and questions on it
"Creative Writing"	a wonderful exercise if thought out carefully
"Find Out"	asks students to give or search for information relating to the theme of the text
"Picture Composition"	leads children to build stories around a picture
"Working Together", "Let's Work in Pairs" and "Project Work"	involve group work
"Let's Read and Do"	asks children to do project work based on some information provided
"Write a Notice"	!

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personalities — talkers, quiet people", "Curiosity and wonder", "Developing creativity", among others. Many exercises also encourage students to talk about their own experiences.

The Marigold textbooks therefore do mark a departure from the NCERT English

textbooks of 2003 in many ways. However, very often the exercises that are intended to stimulate independent thinking or creativity come across as formulaic. The questions on the text in the section “Reading is Fun” (across textbooks of all classes) test only the students’ reading skills and, at times, very basic comprehension abilities.

The Teacher’s Page at the end of each unit, across textbooks, is all of one page. It lists out the themes of the unit, and offers some guidelines on how to conduct the reading, writing, conversation and project exercises. None of these guidelines is expanded in any detail, even when it would be most helpful to do so. We feel there is enough to share with teachers that would run into 3-4 pages. Better still, every textbook can be complemented by a teacher’s handbook which explains in detail how the exercises may be fruitfully conducted/ extended, and which also provides some supplementary materials. To make language learning a truly participatory and enjoyable process, the textbooks have to be reconceptualized in more substantive ways.

At the same time, it is clear that textbooks cannot optimize their potential if all other constraints remain. Teachers face tremendous pressures to achieve a high pass percentage for their class. It leaves them with little scope to do exercises that move beyond the textbook. The teachers we interacted with told us that some of the project work was given to students as summer vacation assignments. The ‘extraneous’ sections were also occasionally given as homework. Had they been trained in different pedagogic methods they might have been better able to incorporate the approaches and the shifts within the new textbooks in class itself. An overhauling of the education system in its current form would be required before we could expect creative textbooks to make an impact.

We have been guided in our choice of texts and analysis from our vantage point as students and teachers of literature. We have sought to bring in the component of the literary in our critiques as well as into the alternative approaches that we propose. Our analyses of selected chapters do not attempt to make the selected chapters representative of the textbooks as a series.

We have negotiated with some of the fundamental literary elements of stories and poems that make them enjoyable and provocative. In our view, the ideal English textbooks must, first and foremost, be pleasurable to read. They must be imbued with *rasa* for both students and teachers — as someone aptly put it in the Eklavya workshop.<sup>1</sup> We believe that if children fall in love with literature, language proficiency would inevitably follow.<sup>2</sup>

In the exercises we offer as alternatives, we seek to explore the possibilities latent

in the space of the textbook to open up students' creative and imaginative powers, provoke their questioning spirit and inventive capabilities. Many of our aims coincide with those of the policy documents. We have been influenced substantially by the principles of Prashika, Eklavya's innovative experiment in primary education. The 'playtexts' that Rimli Bhattacharya and her colleagues had made for the West Bengal government also inspired us deeply.<sup>3</sup>

Our ideal textbooks would be windows to the worlds inside the child's world and the worlds beyond, provoking her to make innumerable exploratory journeys. Our alternative approaches are a beginning towards realizing such an ideal.

#### Notes

1. This was the workshop held at Hoshangabad in April 2009 where we presented our report to Eklavya members and language teachers.
2. A longer note on our ideal textbooks is attached in Appendix B.
3. Collectively conceptualized as 'playtexts' or '*khola-khata*', literally 'the open book' in Bangla for 5-12 year-old children during August 2000 to December 2001. Supported by West Bengal District Primary Education Programme (WBDPEP). The playtexts were conceptualized for overlapping and multi-level use: as supplementary material in school, as substitute for textbooks, and for leisurely engagement any time outside of school. Of the ten playtexts conceptualized and developed in outline form, six units and a Teacher's Help were brought to fruition in the course of the project.

## “The Ship of the Desert” Class III\*

Nivedita Basu

The true sign of intelligence is imagination not knowledge.

Albert Einstein

Marigold textbook for Class III is divided into ten study units. Each unit consists of a poem and a story. Units 2, 4, 7 and 10 are all woven around the general theme of animals and their habitats. Given that this is a recurrent theme in the textbook for Class III, I decided to focus on it for my microanalysis. I especially chose the chapter titled “The Ship of the Desert”, because I observed the classroom session of the poem that constitutes the first half of this unit, “How Creatures Move”. (97)

Living creatures seem to be the major focus of interest for the Class III textbook for English. Unit 2 deals with “birds” and through the story of “Nina and the Baby Sparrows” it tries to familiarize the child with “differences and disabilities in nature”. (Teacher’s Page, 22) Unit 4 starts with “Sea Song” and explores sea life through a short story titled “A Little Fish Story”. After introducing the children to flying and marine creatures, Unit 7 explores the theme of animals and their young ones. So, by the time the child reads Unit 10 of this textbook, she would have already learnt about different living creatures in six earlier lessons.

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However, there is little interlinking between these lessons. All the units remain isolated. Cross-referencing could have added zest to the exercises, ensuring a more composite kind of pedagogy. Segregated units tend to work against the student seeking to make connections, to contrast and compare, unless a very attentive and creative teacher is able to do so!

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\* *Marigold, Book III, Textbook in English for Class III*. New Delhi: NCERT, 2006, pp. 97-108.

The last chapter of this textbook, titled “The Ship of the Desert” is in the form of a dialogue between a camel and a lion. The Teacher’s Page refers to it as a play and the students are asked to take turns to act it out with appropriate expressions and actions. (108) A ‘play’ is a common alternative name for dramatic composition which is designed for performance generally, though not exclusively, in a theatre. Actors take on the roles of characters and perform the indicated action and utter the written dialogue amidst a particular setting and according to the stage directions.

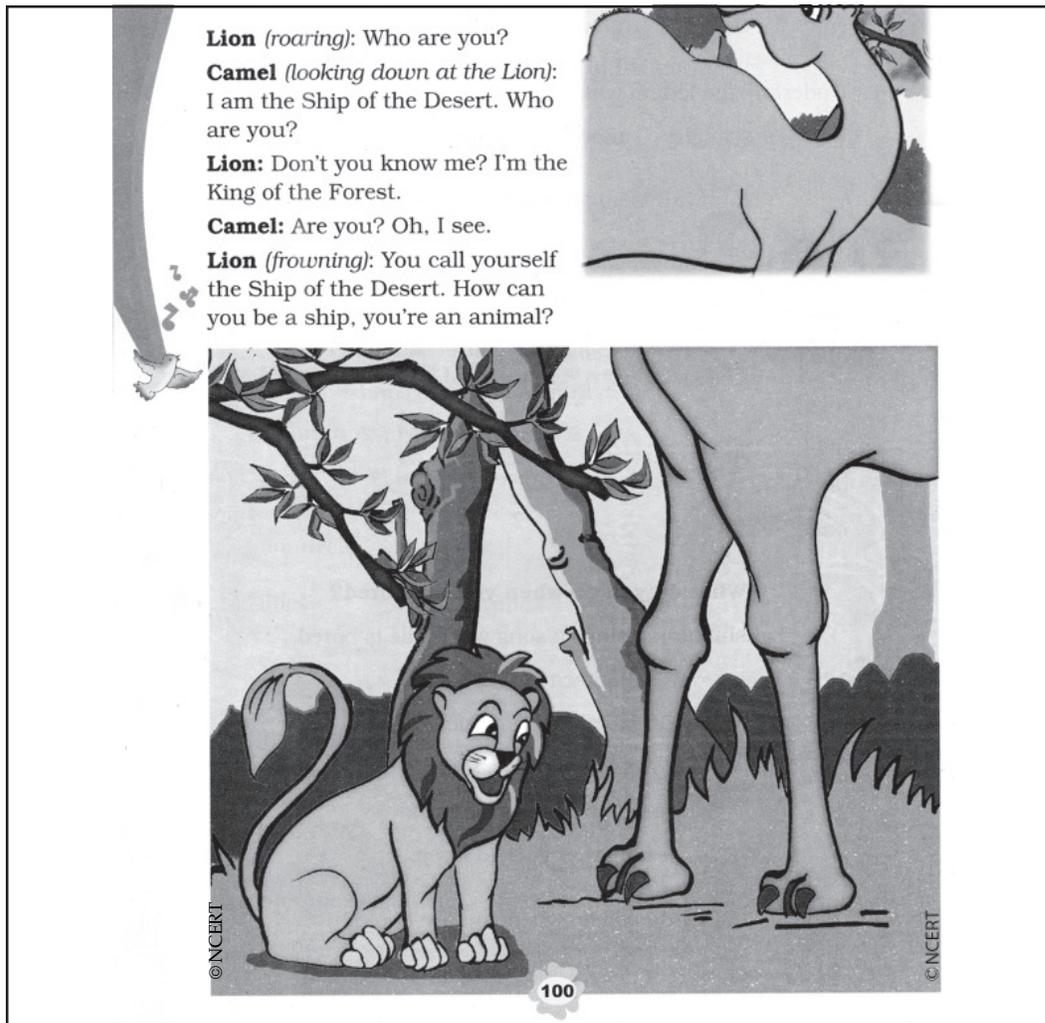


Does “The Ship of the Desert” fulfil the generic requirements of a ‘play’?

Or, is there an erasure of the imaginative potential of the text in order to simplify it for children who are 8-9 years old?

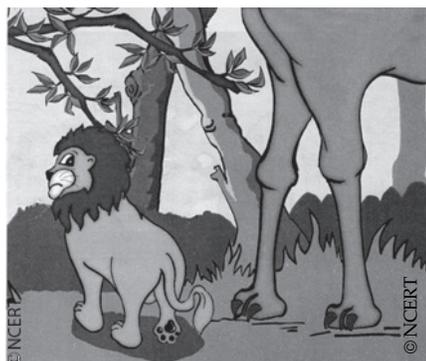
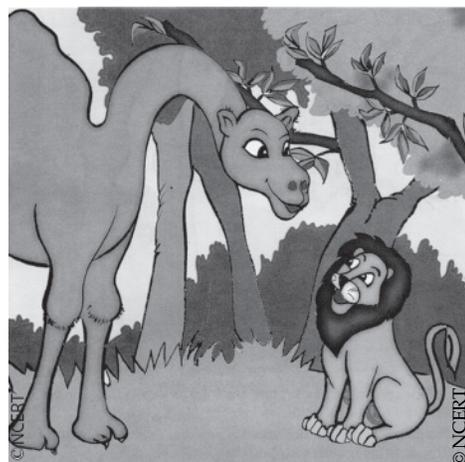
One of the primary requirements of a play is ‘plot’ which means events and actions of the dramatic work. The plot is generally rendered and ordered towards achieving particular artistic and emotional effects. “The Ship of the Desert” seems to be completely lacking a plot. There is no action in this play. The conversation that takes place between the two creatures is a bare exchange of facts. For instance, the child is informed that the camel can run on sand at 25 kilometers an hour and it can store food in its hump for over two weeks. The lion is mystified by the camel’s ability to run fast on sand. The only motor that drives the text forward is the lion’s curiosity regarding the camel’s special ability. The reason is revealed only in the end – the “thick and padded” feet of the camel. This is the only source of dramatic surprise in the text. Should an English lesson become a substitute for one in environmental science?

E.M. Forster introduced major terms of distinction for dramatic characters in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). Dramatic characters may either be “flat” or “round” characters. A flat character is built around a single idea or quality without presenting individual details. In contrast, the round character is complex in temperament and motivation. It is represented with subtle particularity. The characters in this play seem to fall in neither category. They are not even given interesting names. Much like in a science textbook they are referred to as ‘Camel’ and ‘Lion’. They are not endowed with any emotional quality or temperament that can engage the child’s imagination. If compared with any of the popular cartoon series (*Tom and Jerry*, *The Jungle Book*, etc.), “The Ship of the Desert” would come across as a tiring text precisely because it has done away with those elements that make dramatic narration so interesting for children.



According to Forster, two alternative methods of characterization are: showing and telling. (In brief, in “showing” or the “dramatic method”, the author simply presents the characters talking and acting. The reader is left to infer the motives and dispositions that lie behind what they say or do. In “telling”, the author intervenes in order to describe, and often to evaluate, the motives and dispositional qualities of the characters.) In “The Ship of the Desert” the author’s voice is clearly absent. So, the talking and acting of the characters is supposed to reveal the motives and dispositions of the characters whereby the plot is driven. Since the motivation for the speech and action of these two characters is left unexpressed, it might have been worth fleshing out the dialogues by getting the children to articulate (even in gestures) some of these emotions. Instead, there is a rather weak attempt at engaging with emotions of the animal characters through words like “frowning”, “smiling”, “blinking”, “with disdain”, “wonderingly”. (100-01) The exercises make clear that these words are valuable only in their grammatical function as adjectives.

One of the themes of the unit as given on the Teacher's Page is to introduce students to "Animals – Animal habitats". The teacher is asked to use this unit to introduce the class to different regions like "desert areas, cold mountains, hot jungles, etc." It is suggested that the teacher should show the class "pictures of different animals" which are found in these regions and also talk about the way these animals are "suited to their habitats." (108) This may explain the confused setting of the play. Showing a camel in what seems to be a forest on pages 100 (see right) and 101 (see below) does not give an accurate idea about the natural habitat of the camel. Illustrations on pages 100 and 102 show only the long legs of the camel and the background is that of a forest.



Nor does one get any real sense of a desert. For example, what may dunes look like? For that matter, what would a cold desert look and feel like? Finally, not all camels are found in deserts; one frequently sights a camel in a town or a city! If the objective of the 'play' is only to impart factual information, it remains incomplete.

To sum up, the illustrations in "The Ship of the Desert" are repetitive; they depict the characters using stereotypical graphics; they are often disproportionate (as in the diminutive lion and the towering camel), and their purpose seems to be only to fill up space. Most crucially, the illustrations are not related to the exercises.

The overemphasis on environmental issues is replicated even in the exercise titled "Reading is Fun".

The objective questions with four choices can be answered without much thought. Formulating other kinds of questions would have allowed the possibility of more than one correct answer.

"Talk Time" asks students to make sentences out of homonyms. The focus seems to be on the correctness of written response rather than originality of the composition. Can we not have more open-ended questions with adequate space

and time for discussion which would incorporate different viewpoints?

The picture story in the section "Let's Write" shows that the NCERT takes cognizance of this fact. However, the story is the hackneyed one of two goats fighting for space on a bridge and both of them falling into the river. Not only is there an overt moral here (viz. lack of cooperation among peers is to be punished), it also fails to excite the child's imagination.

In what ways might visual and textual cues add depth to this picture? Could the *telling* of a story make it more immediate for the

child? Rather than providing space for isolated sentences, what kind of writing activities would encourage the child to write in her own voice?

Providing more space within the textbook could be one alternative. Class III students too can write a few original sentences so long as the context is made meaningful for them. If what they have to say is valued, they would *like* to write. Even writing a fragment of one's own is better than copying isolated sentences. Writing activities that follow the philosophy of process writing and encourage children to write with a voice might be included.

The last exercise is called "Team Time". This is an additional feature of the textbook introduced after the 2005 NFG Report. Clearly, it is an attempt to realize the ideal of cooperative learning. However, the emphasis is again on the gathering of factual information. Children are asked to find out (from where?) about animals living in icy cold regions, hot wet regions and dry hot regions. English seems to act

© NCERT

### Reading is fun



1. Why is the Camel called the Ship of the Desert?
2. For how many weeks can a camel store food in its hump?
3. What does the camel eat in the desert?
4. Choose the right answer.
  - i. Name the Ship of the Desert
 

(a) lion	(c) camel
(b) crab	(d) tiger
  - ii. Name the King of the Forest
 

(a) lion	(c) monkey
(b) owl	(d) crocodile
  - iii. The feet of the camel are
 

(a) thick and padded	(c) thick and fat
(b) long and fat	(d) thin and padded
  - iv. There are no rivers or lakes in
 

(a) plains	(c) plateaus
(b) mountains	(d) deserts
  - v. At a time a camel can drink
 

(a) 200 bottles of water	(c) 100 bottles of water
(b) 400 bottles of water	(d) 300 bottles of water
  - vi. A camel stores its food in its
 

(a) stomach	(c) legs
(b) hump	(d) lips



merely as a medium to transfer information without the learner exercising her critical and imaginative faculty at all.

The text offers no suggestion to the teacher on how to conduct team activities. It is more than likely that children would rely on elders to complete these activities. Group activities must be interactive and meaningful if they are to promote language learning. We are reminded of a point made in the NFG: “The sense of burden felt by both children and teacher has to do with the systematic tendency – reflected both in syllabus and textbook preparation as well as in teaching and examination – *to treat information as knowledge*” (emphasis added).

On the whole, the Class III textbook has been designed with the intention of relating the process of learning to the immediate environment and the socio-cultural background of the children. Yet, as the microanalysis of “The Ship of the Desert” shows, the objective of teaching subject English has been marginalized in the process.



### Doing more . . .

- ❖ *Moving beyond a bare exchange of facts. . .* The exchange between a domesticated animal and a wild animal offers the teacher an opportunity of discussing a critical concept – freedom. Humour, pathos and unexpected emotions such as rage or resentment may surface in a discussion about animal stories. Change the names of the characters and let the children create a new text.
- ❖ *How could illustrations be more varied?* Working with photographs and/or different drawing styles and forms would bring into the classroom the larger area of visual culture that the child is exposed to. Children may be asked to imagine a desert or a forest. Or, the lives of people in these habitats.
- ❖ *How can exercises encourage the child to speak in her own voice?* A picture story could be composed by the students as a group activity. Pictures could be made by the students themselves or like a collage with images cut out from magazines and newspapers. The new words learnt in the lesson could be given as cues which children could use to create a word-image narrative.
- ❖ Space given to “Team Time” could be increased. There could be more detailed instructions and activities here, but written in simple language.

## “Books” Class IV\*

Sreyoshi Sarkar

Steadily the room shrank, till the book thief could touch the shelves within a few small steps. She ran the back of her hand along the first shelf, listening to the shuffle of her fingernails gliding across the spinal cord of each book. It sounded like an instrument, or the notes of running feet.

Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief*

The themes of units in Marigold textbook for Class IV range from the importance of discipline and time, improving concentration, being sensitive to the physically handicapped, to the importance of art, craft and creativity. Units 1, 2, 4, 6 and 9 have chapters that inform each other by working around the same themes, such as the importance of discipline and time in Unit 1; self-image, respecting oneself and others in Unit 2; and books in Unit 9. However, at the level of exercises or discussion-oriented activities, there is little occasion for the students to go back and forth between the chapters of a unit. The onus rests on the teacher.

The Teacher’s Page does attempt to guide the teacher in drawing the necessary connections between chapters or topics in class, but often falls short of doing so. For example, the guidelines on the Teacher’s Page for Unit 9 on books are: “Take care to see that the language is at the child’s level, the material varied and stories joyful.” (162) As Rama Mathew\*\* pointed out, there has been no consolidated teachers’ training or workshops since the NCERT English Textbooks 2006-08 have been introduced in the classrooms. Therefore, it is probable that “material varied” and “stories joyful” will seem vague to the teacher teaching this particular unit. There are no resources mentioned, no clear sense of what kind of material would be ‘varied’ and ‘joyful’ for a Class IV student and how the teacher must work effectively with such materials within the constraints of classroom time and space.

\* *Marigold, Book IV, Textbook in English for Class IV.* New Delhi: NCERT, 2007, pp. 147-62.

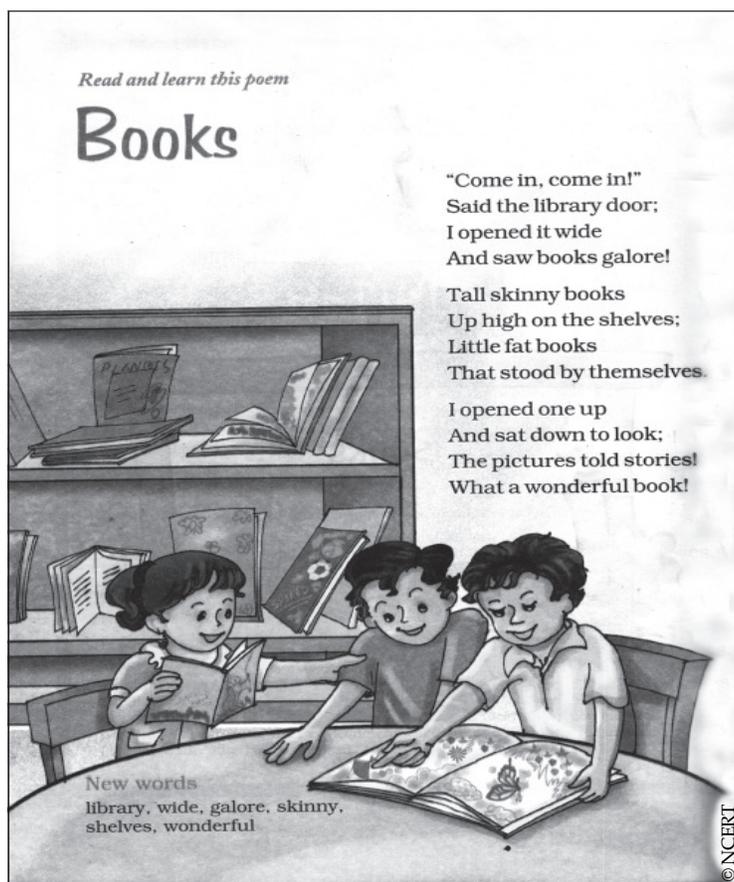
\*\* Personal interviews with Rama Mathew conducted in November - December 2008.

These are some of the most obvious shortcomings in the conceptualization of texts and suggested pedagogic approaches.

The policy documents 2006, the Foreword to the textbooks, and the Teachers' Pages in the Marigold English textbooks, all emphasize participatory learning. The idea is to make learning thought-provoking, fun and relevant to the students. In this process, a unit on books becomes a loaded space for interrogation because it is meta-textual. The understanding of books, what they are able to do in the classroom and beyond, the way their importance and use is conveyed to the students – all become important areas of enquiry. Therefore, this chapter was chosen for in-depth study. This unit is wedged between Unit 8 that deals with caring for plants and trees and Unit 10 that deals with boyhood, art, craft and creativity. There is no logical progression or connection provided between the themes or through the activities; each unit exists in isolation.

Unit 9 on books has two poems, both written in the first person. The first one is anonymous and titled "Books". (148) It is about the speaker's sense of awe on seeing books in a library. The second poem titled "Going to Buy a Book" (152-155) by Rukmini Banerjee is a first person narrative of a brother-sister duo's experiences at a bookstore where they go to buy books with the money their grandfather gives them.

In the first poem, the books themselves are described using various adjectives such as "tall skinny books", "little fat books", and "wonderful book" because their pictures tell stories. There is some potential for dramatization in the poem being read aloud. This might interest the child. The nature of adjectives used could also invigorate the children's imagination. The first person voice usually



evokes involvement from the reader; but here, the 'I' is a passive observer of the shapes, sizes and contents of books.

The poem follows a regular rhyme: "door" and "galore", "shelves" and "themselves" and "look" and "book". But does rhyme alone always make for good poetry? Does not poetry reveal itself in the reciting, singing, chanting of the words? It is worth thinking about the meter as well, since children instinctively take to memorizing verses if the poem has a captivating meter or beat.

Poetry may work equally well through rhyme or in free verse, engaging with language in unexpected ways. It often works through synaesthesia, i.e., a simultaneous evoking of several or all the senses. The typical energy of poetry derives from the poet's choice of words, feelings, thoughts and rhythms that come together to effect a sensory and often emotional response. Most often much is left unsaid in poetry. It is evocative and suggestive. Sharp, brief lines and unstated meanings allow the readers to engage with the poem in their individual capacities to flesh out the meaning.

Every reader connects in a unique way to a poem. But in this poem the readers do not seem to matter because the narrative is self-contained. The representation of books and how children might engage with them is also rather limited.

As for the illustrations, all the children are smiling in exactly the same manner to indicate that they all enjoy books.

Why not carry photographs of books taken from different angles, of bookshops, book fairs, book-sellers of all kinds? These constitute a more identifiable part of the child's real life experience and would also generate more interest and thinking about the topic. Besides, it would bring in questions of perspectives, angles, lines and curves...

### **Exercises**

The only space given to independent thought, speaking and writing seems to be in the section titled "Let's Talk". However, judging from our classroom observations, this section might well be left out in the class because the teacher's emphasis is primarily on vocabulary building and grammar related exercises. The latter are often in the form of fill-in-the-blanks that may have no relation to the subject matter of that particular chapter. There are no language exercises to tease out the thoughts of the children. Literature is simply understood as fixed units of prose, poetry and drama and equated for the most part with passive language learning.

Further, this poem is meant for students of Class IV. Our classroom observations and interactions with the same age group at Kendriya Vidyalaya make it clear that these children deal with far more complex texts in their lives. They are very involved with and have much to say about what they watch on television, in films, in newspapers and magazines, on hoardings across the city and their daily experiences at home, in the neighbourhood and other spaces available to them. Children frequent public spaces such as parks, bus and train stations, airports (though a minority); they daily make use of public transport—buses, auto-rickshaws and now the Metro in places like Delhi. The range of their exposure is enormous at one level. They have moved beyond pictures telling stories as objects of supreme interest. The visual still fascinates them but they need to be provoked by complex visuals. They are also capable of tackling the more demanding content of books.

What is missing therefore is an opportunity for children to bring in their insights, observations and perceptions to the text. The textbook should not blindly mirror contemporary visual culture; but it can provide a site for students and teachers to critically engage with the world around them.



### Doing More . . .

- ❖ If we want that children enjoy books and understand their importance, we need to ensure that they relate to books at an individual level. They must have access to a library in the best possible ways. In order to encourage children to read whatever interests them or look at pictures and think about them, we need to rethink the ways in which a library actually works within the school space. (Many schools do not have libraries.) Books may be kept in class for children to look at and/or read at their leisure. Children have diverse interests, their attention spans vary. They need a fair amount of time and space to be with books, whether in the library, in class, or at a book fair.
- ❖ One of the suggested exercises on the Teacher's Page (162) is that the teacher could put up a chart on the classroom board where the students record their readings every week. If done voluntarily, this could be an ongoing and meaningful activity.
- ❖ *They should be allowed to choose their own books.* Afterwards, they might be asked to relate to either a favourite character or an event. Even illustrations can generate new beginnings. Their responses too could come in a mix of genre, form, image and word.

## “Going to Buy a Book”

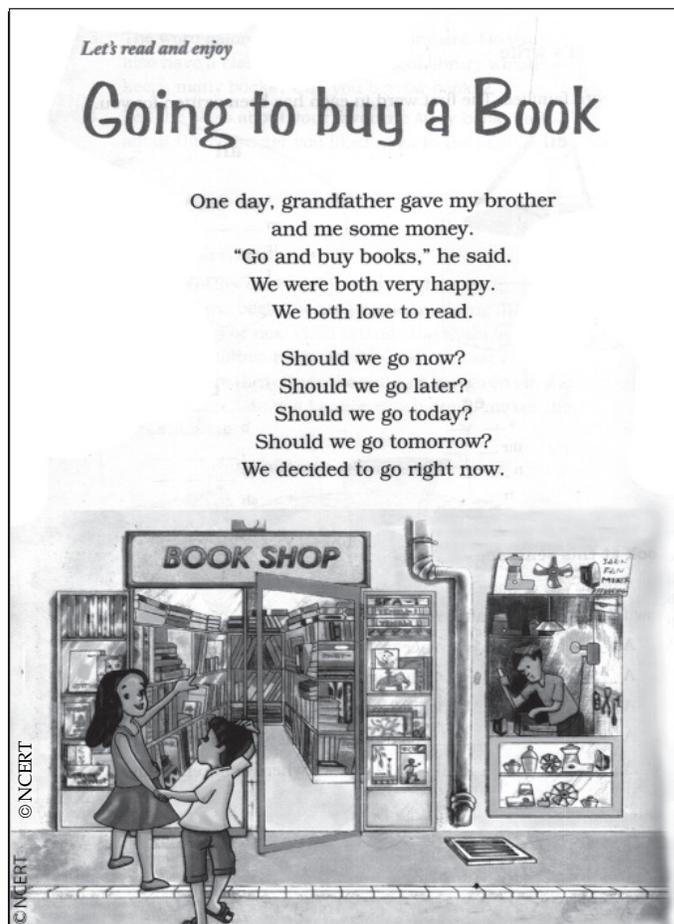
The second poem is in free verse and organized in stanzas. It brings up the questions we often ask ourselves before we can make a decision. Ideally, it can allow for a lot of discussion in class about dilly-dallying before doing something, going alone to a place, fussing about what clothes, books and toys to buy and even about different kinds of bookstores. Again, such discussions need to be initiated by the teacher since the textbook exercises themselves do not prompt any thinking aloud. Even if the teachers encouraged their students to share thoughts and experiences, time constraints might impede meaningful exchanges.

This poem abounds in adjectives and adverbs. It is constructed so as to emphasize the following dilemma for the duo. Firstly, whether they should go “now” or “later” and with “somebody” or “alone”. Secondly, they can’t decide what kind of books they should buy – “with a lot of pictures”, “with a lot of stories”, “about animals”, “machines” or “wars”. Given that no names of real books are mentioned in the poem or shown in the illustrations, the teacher could easily ask students to

make up titles, or imagine various kinds of books.

However, neither of the two poems speaks of the imaginative potential – the excursions into the past, or future (!) – that books make possible, or the range of responses they may elicit in different readers.

Or, at a more basic level: Who writes books? What makes one want to write a book? What might books be? What could books be about? Poetry, stories/novels, history, the stars and the skies, minerals and volcanoes deep inside the earth, the human body. . .



Let's read and enjoy

## Going to buy a Book

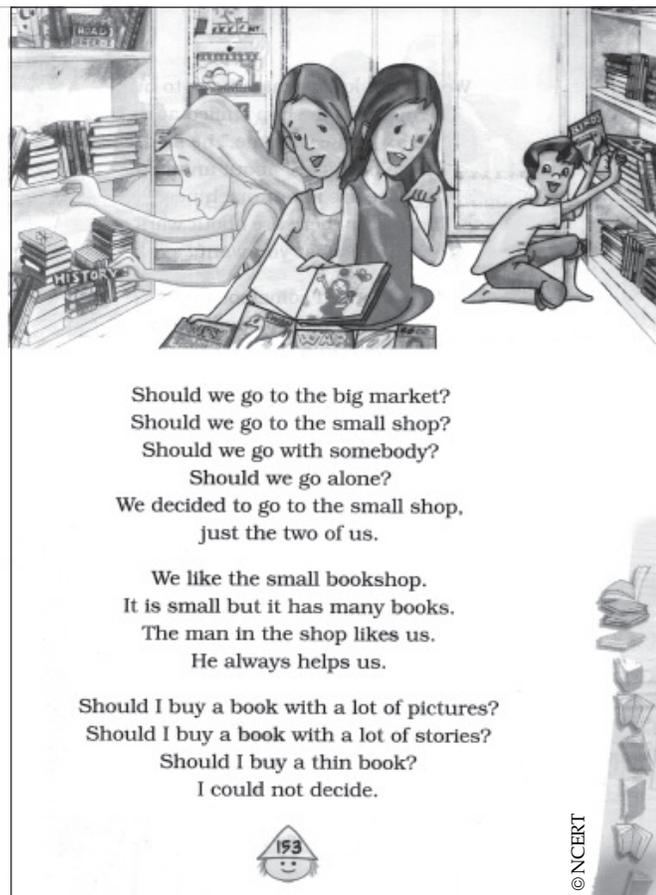
One day, grandfather gave my brother  
and me some money.  
"Go and buy books," he said.  
We were both very happy.  
We both love to read.

Should we go now?  
Should we go later?  
Should we go today?  
Should we go tomorrow?  
We decided to go right now.

The readers of both poems in Unit 9 function as passive audiences: they are not invited to discuss the books they have read, why they may like or dislike books, and what activities *they* might prefer over reading. There is also no activity that connects the two poems, unless the teacher in the class chooses to generate a discussion linking the two.

As pointed out earlier, while the Teacher's Page does offer some directions to make this unit 'come alive' in class, there are no detailed guidelines and resources. Apart from "Let's Talk", the other activities include fill-in-the-blanks which focus on vocabulary building, and working with adjectives and conjunctions. The two activities that children would find useful and fun are the ones that teach them to make bookmarks and cover their books. However, our classroom observations show that these very activities might be relegated to 'homework' given the constraints that teachers work under. (Refer to "The Text and Beyond Class IV" in chapter 4.)

To conclude, while Unit 9 has a rich topic, neither the choice of texts nor the activities match up to its promise. There is no attempt to bring in the real world of books – what they contain and how students might engage with them. There is no exploration of books beyond the library and the neighbouring bookstore, given the many contexts in which children, especially in metropolitan areas like Delhi, might actually engage with books. For instance, they are aware of book fairs, books sold at traffic signals by children often of their own age, and books sold by vendors on the pavements, in weekly bazaars etc. These situations could be



We did not know which book to buy.  
 The man in the shop smiled at us  
 "Relax, come with me," he said.  
 "These books are about animals.  
 Those are about machines.  
 Those over there are about wars.  
 Take what you want."

I picked some books.  
 My brother picked some books.  
 I sat on the floor.  
 He sat on the chair.  
 And we read and we read and we read.



It was very quiet.  
 There was no sound.  
 One hour passed.  
 Two hours passed.  
 Finally, we knew which books to buy.

The man in the bookshop smiled at us.  
 I got a fat book with many stories.  
 My brother got a big book with many pictures.

We ran home to our grandfather.  
 We climbed on his bed.  
 He put his arms around us and then  
 We read, and read, and read.

– Rukmini Banerji

New words  
 alone, bookshop, machines, finally, climbed



opened up for story telling and play acting, or for a discussion of how children see books in relation to education, poverty and reading practices, just as real pictures of the interiors of a bookstore or a book fair would do.

The poems and activities in this unit function primarily as a basis to study descriptive words. There seems little possibility of moving out of the prescribed grid as given in the textbook or as the teacher might suggest in "Let's Write". (157) At least some children of Class IV (depending on their economic background) would be familiar with comics, sudoku, puzzle books and magazines. Working with peers in pairs or groups might bring in these forms into the classroom.

Stories are clearly an important part of children's lives at this stage (in Class IV). The "Let's talk" exercise on pp. 149-50 at least gives the children the chance to re-narrate or even make up

on the spot stories they like with prompts such as "What kinds of stories do you like?" and "Tell the class about your favourite story book. Talk about the character you liked most in the book."

In contrast, the "Let's write" exercise on p.157 completely stifles such creative classroom possibilities. In an effort towards vocabulary building it presents a fill-in-the-blanks passage wherein Paro's mother tells her a story that makes her open her eyes wide and smile after which she goes to sleep.

Neither Paro nor her mother appears in the two poems discussed



### Let's write

1. Look at these sentences in the story –
  - (a) Should we go to the big market?
  - (b) Should we go to the small shop?
  - (c) Should I buy a thin book?

The coloured words above are describing words.

Now fill in more describing words into the passage below –

It was a \_\_\_\_\_ night. A \_\_\_\_\_ girl sat up in bed listening to her mother tell a \_\_\_\_\_ story. Her \_\_\_\_\_ eyes opened wide and she gave a \_\_\_\_\_ smile. "Now go to sleep, Paro," her mother closed the book. "\_\_\_\_\_ dreams."

2. Imagine that you will go to the bookshop tomorrow. What will you do there? Write five sentences beginning with –
  - (a) I shall \_\_\_\_\_
  - (b) I shall \_\_\_\_\_
  - (c) I shall \_\_\_\_\_
  - (d) I shall \_\_\_\_\_
  - (e) I shall \_\_\_\_\_

above, nor do they appear anywhere else in Marigold IV. As such there is no context provided vis-à-vis where they live, how old Paro is, what they look like etc. This lack of information may often be positive, given that it might push students towards an imaginative filling in of such details. What is limiting in the particular exercise is that there is no space for deliberating on *what kind of story* Paro's mother might have been telling her. If one were to fill in the blank with 'adventure' or 'horror' and stop at that, there is so much potential wasted. Why not try to open up the several meanings of these words? Why not discuss relationships between certain kinds of stories, ways of narration, and the bodily responses it produces in the students and the teacher? Such classroom activities would also allow for dramatization of words themselves, dressing them up through a range of enunciation and intonation etc. It would make word learning and language learning more exciting for students rather than being about mechanically learning by rote.

The second exercise on the page also confines the child's activity to 'within the bookshop'. Since children are trained to follow the text when answering questions, it is likely that the sentences here will also be completed following the actions of the brother-sister duo in "Going to Buy a Book".

Finally then, even with a potentially wonderful topic like "Books" neither the poems nor the exercises encourage active reader participation — either in the action or through individual intellectual, sensory or emotional responses.

### Doing More . . .

- ❖ Working with photographs of the interiors of various kinds of bookstores, book fairs and any other space where different kinds of books can be found would encourage the child's engagement with books and their varied contexts.



## “My Elder Brother” Class V\*

Anuja Madan

School has to teach you to know, whether you like it or not, a certain number of classics amongst which...you will later recognize [some] as ‘your’ own classics. . .

Italo Calvino, *Why Read the Classics*

Like Marigold textbooks for Classes III and IV, the textbook for Class V is divided into 10 study units, each comprising two chapters. Classics — Western and Indian — abound in the textbook. There are excerpts from *Robinson Crusoe*, *Rip Van Winkle*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, the story “Flying Away” from *Panchatantra*, and an abridged translation of Munshi Premchand’s famous short story, “Bade Bhai Saheb”.

In my informal interaction with Ms. Z during my visits to Kendriya Vidyalaya, she appreciated the textbook precisely for its inclusion of many classics. That these texts were abridged and otherwise mediated versions did not seem to lessen her veneration. The textbook encourages such an orientation: “Teachers should encourage children to read classics in English as well as in any other languages they know, to enhance their reading habit,” states the Teacher’s Page of one unit which includes a classic. (77)

The adaptation of classics for textbooks is worth exploration on several counts. In this section, I shall do a detailed textual analysis of the textbook version of “Bade Bhai Saheb”, written by Premchand (1880-1936) and first published in 1933. It has been the subject of many Hindi plays; it has also been a popular choice for Hindi textbook writers for decades. The story in Marigold Textbook V is entitled “My Elder Brother” and is re-created as a dialogue between the two brothers. I would like to explore how this adaptation is informed by the textbook makers’ pedagogical orientation, notions of morality, understanding of literature, and assumptions about child readers/learners.

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\* *Marigold, Book V, Textbook in English for Class V*. New Delhi: NCERT, 2008, pp. 58-77.

The study of the 'classic' in this case will lead us to look at questions of abridgement, translation and treatment — in form, language and imagery.

The predilection for including classics in textbooks has a practical reason of course. Textbooks in India are usually made under tremendous time pressure, often with little coordination between one team of writers and illustrators and another. Selecting a text already accepted as a 'classic' dispenses with the need to search for comparatively less accessible, but perhaps equally enriching texts. More importantly, they are seen to be *representative* of a particular cultural and literary heritage ('Western' and 'Indian') that is normativized. There is an unspoken agreement that students need to be familiarized with these as representative texts.

From this perspective, the inclusion of translated Indian classics in English textbooks alongside the more familiar names of the West is welcome; it is an attempt to counter the hegemony of Western classics. But substitution or inclusion alone can never be enough. The questions that need to be asked are: What are these texts made to signify? How are they made relevant for contemporary young readers? Or, as Calvino asks in the epigraph to this section, how does a child *make the classic her own*?

But first we need to ask a more fundamental question, one that has been debated since centuries: *What is a classic?*

In the words of the South African author and Nobel laureate J.M. Coetzee, the classic is most often understood to be "that which is not time-bound, which retains meaning over successive ages, which lives." However, he questions "facile notions of the classic as timeless, as that which unproblematically speaks across boundaries." He cites an example from the history of Western music — Bach had sunk into oblivion for several generations till he was popularized by German nationalists as part of their uprising against Napoleon.

Coetzee emphasizes that:

a classic is constituted by historical forces and within a specific historical context. Only once we have acknowledged this point are we in a position to ask the more difficult questions: What, if any, are the limits to any historical relativization of the classic?

What, if anything, is still left of the classic after the classic has been historicized, which may still claim to speak across the ages? <sup>1</sup>



What then might be the historical specificity of Premchand's story?

How would it speak to contemporary Indian children?

Are there aspects of the narrative that would be of interest at all times, i.e. what might be its 'universalist' appeal?

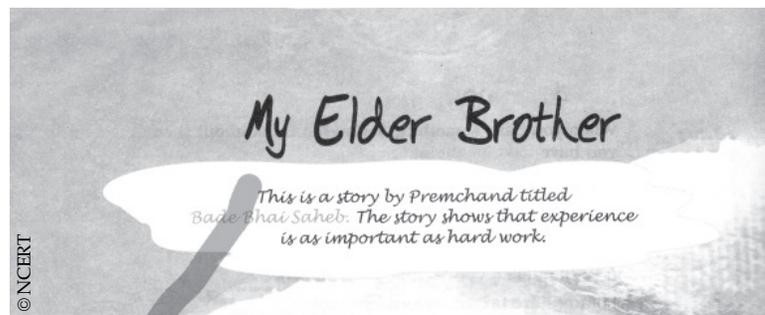
### Relevance of the Classic

"Bade Bhai Saheb" is the story of two brothers sent to live in a hostel to attend school in a town. Bade Bhai, the elder brother, keeps failing in the exams despite his extreme studiousness, while the younger — the narrator of the story — scores high, although *he* spends most of his time playing!

Premchand's story ostensibly compares the two very different brothers, the humour emerging at the expense of Bade Bhai Saheb. But read between the lines, it is a strong denunciation of the colonial system of education and its corollary, the textbook culture. When this story becomes part of a textbook it carries the potential to subvert the very textbook culture that we spoke about in the introduction. More than the other classics in the textbook for class V, therefore, Premchand's story is an ideal entry point into debates around the timelessness, universality and relevance of a classic.

The textbook writers appear neither to have engaged with the historical specificity of the classic, nor — to use Coetzee's argument — with its contemporary relevance. Ironically enough, the text replicates the very ideologies that Premchand critiques, demonstrating how deeply entrenched the colonial legacy really is.

Let us begin with the frame. Chapter 10, like all the chapters in the textbook, begins with an introductory note (see the picture below):



As is the case with most other chapters, the Teacher's Page at the end of this unit contains no information about the author, the text or the date it was published. In

this case perhaps information on the author is unnecessary, but even a brief reference to the homogenized, textbook-dominated education system in the colonial era would have helped the teacher recognize the contemporary relevance of the text and could have shaped her class discussions.

The Teacher's Page states that the presentation of Premchand's story sets forth "translation as a means of understanding cultures," without mentioning that the text is a substantially truncated version of the original. None of the Teacher's Pages of those units which include classics offer any guidelines on engaging with a classic.

Instead, we have the introductory note functioning as a cue: "The story shows that experience is as important as hard work."

Does not this meta-discourse close the space for the child's own, possibly multiple interpretations of the story by dictating *the* 'moral' to her? It conditions her to rely on the authority of the textbook rather than her own views, born out of her subjective experience. This 'summary' is contrary to the basic spirit of the story, as well as the recommendations of the policy documents and the Foreword to Marigold textbooks.

Finally, is this really the 'message' of the story? (Assuming that all stories must have a message.) The Teacher's Page states that the theme of this story is "respecting elders and their experience." The focus is thus shifted from Bhai Saheb's situation as a student to a more generalized code of deference towards elders.

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In Premchand's story, Bhai Saheb has internalized many principles of colonial education:

- subjects of study dissociated from the lived reality of the child;
  - over-reliance on the textbook;
  - equation of wisdom and knowledge with bookish knowledge;
  - rote learning;
  - competitiveness;
  - fear of punishment;
  - equation of self worth to academic performance;
  - no space for individuality;
  - the exclusion of fun or joy from work, i.e. a binary between work and play.
-

The pathos of the story arises from his struggle to fit within a system he is unable to repudiate, even while recognizing many of its limitations. One of the most memorable parts of Premchand's text is when Bhai Saheb launches into a long tirade against the system after he fails and his younger brother tops his class:

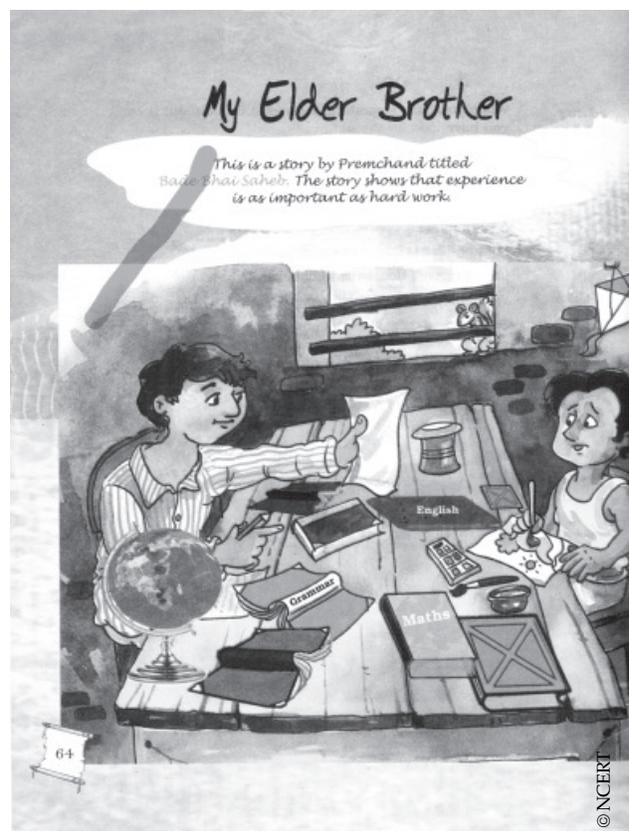
[Examiners] only see what is written in the textbook. [They] want that boys memorize each and every letter. And this rote learning is given the name of education and after all what is the use of studying these nonsensical things?<sup>2</sup>

More profoundly, we sense the psychological dissonance that an alien educational ideology has fostered in him. This is emblemized in his consistently 'failing' to move to the next class.

How does the Marigold adaptation (text of dialogues) reach out to its contemporary readers — through image, vocabulary, verbal and visual cues, expressions and sensibilities?

Bhai Saheb's plight is accentuated by his position as a migrant to the city. In the textbook version, his alienation from nature is highlighted in the full-page illustration with which the story opens. (The written text begins on the adjacent page.) Bhai Saheb is shown studying at a desk (presumably in his hostel room) littered with 'subject' books. The younger brother at the other end of the desk is painting a nature study; he looks somewhat daunted by the list which the big brother is flaunting. The barred window gives us a glimpse of the vista outside.

In contrast are the other two illustrations (67, 69) of the open, natural spaces that 'Munna' (the name given to the younger brother) is always running off to. Images have a way of creating



empathy between the absent and the present; something of that process has been successfully achieved here.

Bhai Saheb's situation would resonate with a large number of students in government central schools. Many are first generation learners whose parents/relatives may often be migrants from villages to cities. Contemporary Indian children across classes, castes and communities who struggle with the fear of failure, punishment, and lack of self-worth may well empathize with him.

Besides the illustrations mentioned above, the only and the most emphatic way in which a link with readers of the 21st century is made comes at the end of the text when Munna expresses his affection for his brother by saying "I love you" — in a decidedly contemporary, urban lingo.

However, another illustration of the same text shows young boys wearing dhotis, dating the text to Premchand's era, possibly creating confusion in the readers' minds.

### **Bridging Abridgements**

Abridgements of classics in the NCERT textbooks we have studied have some staple characteristics:

- 
- simplified narrative;
  - simplified language and emotions;
  - unidimensional foregrounding of one theme over the others;
  - focus on the message/moral;
  - (often) an erasure of irony that might have been present in the original.
- 

A fundamental assumption lies behind these changes: the child reader is seen as incapable of understanding complexity, and must be taught what to learn by the 'superior' adult. In this case, the exercises and questions represent the adult.

As mentioned earlier, the younger brother's first person narrative is transformed into a dialogue between the two brothers for easier reading. But a story is not only the plot. The style makes it distinctive: its ability to evoke emotions in the readers — the play with language among other qualities — is what constitutes the literary.

There is poignant irony in Premchand's story. For example, Bhai Saheb delivers homilies with increasing intensity to his brother on the importance of hard work for success! Similarly, there is a nuanced representation of the younger brother's change in emotions towards Bhai Saheb — moving from fear of his brother to a complex mixture of arrogant disrespect and fear as he breezes through exams and spends more and more time playing with friends.

At the end of the text, Bhai Saheb reminds his brother that even if the latter has surpassed him in academics, that would not erase the five-year gap between them. More important than academic success was the wisdom that came from experience. He gives the example of their uneducated parents who would always possess the right to guide their children: "They might not know what kind of government the US has, how many times Henry VIII married, or how many constellations there are in the sky, but there are thousands of subjects that they know more about than we do."<sup>3</sup>

This monologue makes a powerful impact on the narrator; he realizes how immature he has been, and looks upon his brother with new eyes. It is an emotional moment, underplayed by Premchand, which marks a shift in their relationship.



Does the clichéd phrase "I love you, Bhaiya!" capture the depth of this shift?

Or, does it foreclose all possibilities of a complex, changing emotional relationship? Of different value systems?

The question of closure is critical. In the original, Bhai Saheb admits that he too is tempted to play instead of study all the time, but that his conscience stands in the way. At that moment, a kite flies past them, a group of boys running after it. (Which boy will not run to catch a falling kite?) Bhai Saheb leaps up and catches it, racing away with it towards the hostel. The narrator and the rival group of boys give him chase. The metaphor of kite flying marks the end of the story. We have a glimpse of Bade Bhai Saheb behaving like any other boy — spontaneous and joyful, in full flight. The Marigold text dispenses with the nuances of the original, emphasized especially in the final lines.

So how do we decide what is worth keeping?

For example, a whole range of boyish activities that the younger brother loves have been deleted in the translated version — swinging on gates, juggling pebbles, climbing and jumping off walls, flying paper butterflies. . . .

If space is a constraint, could these activities have been reflected in the illustrations? How might they have provided the basis for multilingual exercises? Or even used to find out what boys and girls love to do now?

Abridgements, particularly when there is a change of form, carry a responsibility towards 'transmitting' the tone and tenor of the classic to a new generation. The focus on 'right morals' partakes of a limited pedagogical view, based on a somewhat quantitative and superficial notion of learning.

Some questions come to mind:



Is there no 'learning' in developing empathy with characters?

Do the child's linguistic, intellectual and imaginative capabilities not expand when s/he starts enjoying the literary sophistication of a text?

Does the prescriptive ideology that we have seen to dominate the treatment of Premchand's story allow for self-knowledge?

Calvino elaborates on how classics become one's own:

Classics are books which exercise a particular influence, both when they imprint themselves on our imagination as unforgettable, and when they hide in the layers of memory disguised as the individual's or the collective unconscious.<sup>4</sup>

When we choose to make texts from classics, it is worth having an extensive discussion on how the young reader from a different generation or a different culture might make it her own.

### Doing More . . .

- ❖ In keeping with the spirit of the original, the illustration on the last page could either depict Bade Bhai Saheb jumping up high for the kite or the two brothers triumphantly running after the kite, chased by the other kite runners. A double-page spread could show all kinds of kites falling from the sky, some stuck in trees, draped on gates or picked up by a stray dog.
- ❖ The questions that follow this particular chapter are on the adjacent page. The first three ask for information. The last two allow the child to engage

**Reading is Fun**

1. What are the things that Munna liked to do?
2. What did Bhaiya do all day?
3. Why was Munna not happy with the timetable that Bhaiya made for him?
4. How do you think Munna felt when his brother was so strict with him? Why was Bhaiya so strict with him?
5. Whose character do you like more — Munna's or Bhaiya's? Why?

**Let's Talk**

1. Do you have a timetable at school?  
How many periods are there for the following subjects and activities in one week?  
English \_\_, Hindi \_\_, Maths \_\_, Science \_\_, Social Studies \_\_, Games \_\_, Art \_\_, Craft \_\_, Music \_\_, Dance \_\_, Any other activity? \_\_
2. Now make a timetable for yourself including your study time and your play time.


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Marigold 71

with the text at a deeper level, and ask for an opinion. The fifth question allows the child space to think at a subjective level. However, it may not interest the child to engage with the chapter in a more in-depth manner on his/her own.

- ❖ The “Let’s Talk” section begins with a simple counting exercise. The timetable exercise touches upon a very important issue, that of defining or distinguishing between work and pleasure. Students could be led to think about questions like: What is work? When is it pleasurable? Of all activities, this one should definitely not have been framed as a task!
- ❖ The exercises as a whole invariably *talk down* to the students. Whereas, the story calls for an identification of the readers with the protagonists at many

levels. How may the exercises have facilitated a rewarding subjective reading of the abridged version? The following section attempts to provide some answers.

The central metaphor of this story is the kite — a liberatory image. That could be the ideal starting point for the exercises. These are built around different themes and skills, and some are multilingual in nature. The exercise could appear in balloons, boxes or kite shapes all over the page.

The original ending of the short story written by Premchand:

संयोग से उसी वक्त एक कटा हुआ कनकौआ हमारे ऊपर से गुज़रा। उसकी डोर लटक रही थी। लड़कों का एक तब्वर पीछे-पीछे दौड़ा चला आता था. . .

. . . भाई साहब लम्बे हैं ही! उछलकर उसकी डोर पकड़ ली और बेतहाशा होस्टल की तरफ दौड़े। मैं पीछे-पीछे दौड़ रहा था।

(Sanyog se usi vakt ek kata hua kankaooa hamare upar se guzra. Uski dor latak rahi thi. Ladkon ka ek tabbar peeche peeche dauda chala aata tha.....

. . . Bhai Saheb lambe hain hi! Uchalkar uski dor pakad lee aur betahaasha hostel ki taraf daude. Main peeche peeche daud raha tha.)

Coincidentally, at that moment a cut kite flew over us, trailing its string. A group of boys was chasing it...

Bhai Saheb is tall of course! He leapt up, caught the kite-string and excitedly ran towards the hostel. I was running after him.<sup>5</sup>



What kind of an ending would you have liked?

What appealed most to you in this story?

Why do you think Bhaiya keeps failing? If you were his friend, would you have any suggestions for him?

*Poonch banao! Patang banao aur udaao!* (Make a tail! Make a kite and fly it high!)

This last could be a teacher or student guided activity of making kites in class, or outdoors.



What sort of a kite would you like to make?

There are many different kinds of kites all over the world.

Where can you learn about them?

Find out how kites fly.

What is the difference between a 'patang' and 'kankaooa'? On which occasions are kites flown in our country?

The original Hindi version could also be introduced to the students through questions relating to the excerpts. Here are some possibilities:

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Munna loved to play football, kabbaddi, volleyball, and catch falling kites. What are the fun activities *you* enjoy?

Make a list of your favourite games. Describe to your friends how to play any two of these games — one indoors and one outdoors.

What are some of the things you do well: for example, making tea, riding a bike, polishing shoes? How or when did you learn these skills?

Write a short paragraph starting with the sentence "I want to be free to/from..."

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In Premchand's story, after the narrator received a scolding from Bhaiya, this is what the younger brother said:

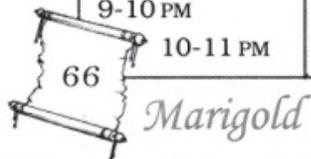
I would make a resolve that from now on I would study very hard. I'd make a timetable right away. Without making a plan in advance, how can one start working? In my timetable there was no space for play.<sup>6</sup>

No space for play?!

Of course, he never managed to stick to such a timetable for even half a day. And yet he kept making similar timetables.

The Marigold unit provides us with a timetable.

Time	Schedule
6 AM	Wash your hands Have your breakfast and sit down to study
6-8 AM	English
8-9 AM	Maths
9-9.30 AM	History
3.30 PM	Then off to school
5-6 PM	Grammar Half an hour for strolling
6.30 - 7 PM	English composition Then dinner
8-9 PM	Translation
9-10 PM	Hindi
10-11 PM	Other subjects and then to bed



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A more creative exercise would have been to initiate a discussion around time and work, perception and clock time, before the learner made her or his own timetable. For example:



Doesn't time go slow when work is boring? And doesn't it fly when you are doing something fun! Think of some incidents when work became play.

If you became a teacher, how would you make boring subjects fun?

Make a timetable for yourself. But it should be one which you would like to follow!

#### Notes

1. J.M. Coetzee, "What is a Classic? A Lecture," in *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays 1986-1999*. New York: Viking Press, 2001, pp. 11-13.
2. Munshi Premchand, "Bade Bhai Saheb," in *Mansarovar Bhag 1*. Allahabad: Sarasvati Press, 1989, p. 93. Translations are mine.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
4. Italo Calvino, *Why Read the Classics* (translated by Martin McLaughlin). London: Vintage, 2000, p. 4.
5. Munshi Premchand, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

## Classroom Observations

Young children are restless all round;  
their bodies are restless and their minds are in sympathy with the body. . . .  
a moving mind has more power to assimilate facts,  
to gather knowledge from the outside world.

Rabindranath Tagore, *Letters from Java*

This section comprises the field notes from our observation of English teaching in Classes III, IV and V at two government schools — Rajkiya Pratibha Vikas Vidyalaya (henceforth RPV) and Kendriya Vidyalaya (henceforth KV) in Delhi.\* RPV and KV use NCERT Marigold textbooks for teaching English in primary and secondary classes.

Nivedita Basu observed English teaching in Class III at RPV, Sreyoshi Sarkar in Class IV at KV, and Anuja Madan in Class V at KV.

Both schools were co-educational. The average class composition was between 40-45 students, and classes were of half an hour duration each. Two of the teachers switched between English and Hindi in English classes, while one teacher spoke primarily in English.

We visited the schools over a two-week period in order to learn how English as a subject is transacted within the classroom, the students' responses to the textbooks, and the classroom experience as a whole. The classroom observation was intended primarily to complement our study of the textbooks. The analysis we offer of selected units in this chapter is therefore in no way meant to be representative

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\* Both RPV and KV are government schools affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE).

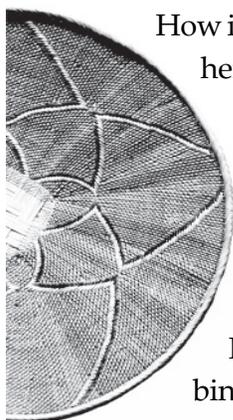
either of the teachers' pedagogical methods or of the Marigold series as a whole. Our analysis may provoke us to think in different ways about the relationship of the word, the world, the image, the child and the teacher with the textbook as a possible catalyst.

## Methodology

We realized in the course of our observations why the multimodal nature of the teaching and learning experience adds more value to the classroom experience. As Carey Jewitt has discussed, the multimodal approach takes into account different modes of communication between the teacher and the student such as speech, writing, image, gesture, movement and posture — the entire gamut of body language.<sup>1</sup>

We sat amongst the students and tried to understand how teachers dealt with specific chapters from the textbook, as well as observe how students received and responded to the former. We also paid attention to how the blackboard was used; the arrangement of desks and benches; the interaction of students amongst themselves and with the teacher during class; the display of charts, maps and drawings on boards or on walls in the classroom; and the use of other resources (if any) brought by the teacher and the students to class. As discussed in the chapter on "Policy-Praxis Negotiations", the NFG has recommended an input-rich environment in English classrooms. Teachers' awareness of different modalities in the teaching-learning processes would make learning less formal, less intimidating and more interactive.

Our classroom observations, interviews with the teachers and interactions with students gave us insights into how English as a subject is understood. Following on our own group discussions, some of the questions we brought to the study:



How is subject English conceptualized by the English teacher herself?

What does she consider worth teaching within and outside the English textbook?

What kind of competency in English does she expect to develop in her students?

Is there an internalization of the commonly perceived binary of literature/language?



What resources are the students offered in class for learning English?

How do the resources of visual display and spatial arrangement influence the teaching-learning process?

How are the students positioned, physically and conceptually, in relation to this knowledge?

Though two different schools and four different classrooms were observed, we found many common trends in classroom practices. These are presented in the next section.

### General Observations

At RPV, the students are divided into Hindi and English sections from Class VI onwards, according to their preferred medium of instruction. KV is an English medium school but both English and Hindi are used as mediums of instruction. In both schools, however, the teachers who taught English showed a considerable degree of uncertainty when it came to discussing how they understood English as a subject, how they treated it in the classroom and what levels of competency they expected of their students. (Perhaps they were being made conscious about these issues for the first time.)

But they all thought that parents and employers in developing countries like India see proficiency in English language as a prerequisite for successful competition in a globalized economy. Therefore they are answerable to the popular “demand” that students should be able to read, write and speak fluent English.

The teachers, it may be admitted, were initially discomfited by our presence in the classroom and said that we must not be too severe in our assessment of their English teaching skills because after all they were not “language experts”. This diffidence was partly because they felt they were being “inspected”, although we had repeatedly assured them to the contrary.

Sreyoshi had the following conversation with Ms. Y:

*Ms. Y:* You all teach English in colleges so you know better English than us. You must also teach us better English.

*Sreyoshi:* We are not here to judge your teaching skills, but to see how the NCERT English textbooks work in class, etc.

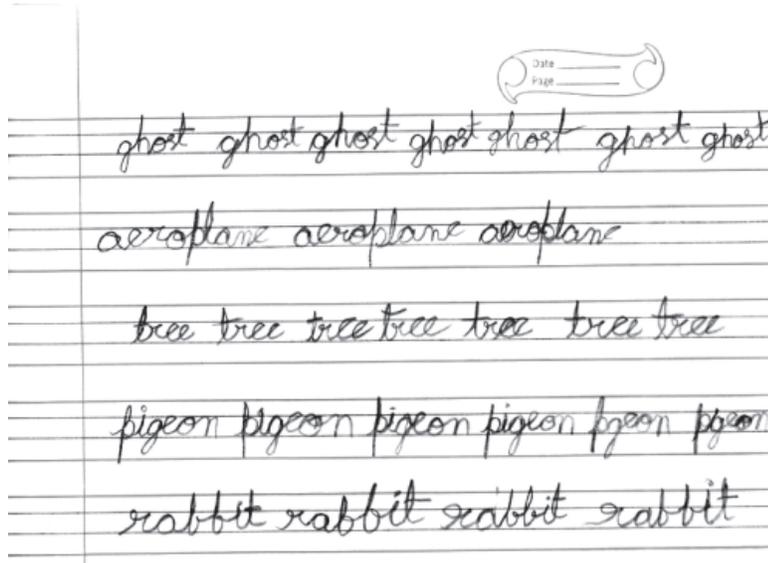
Ms. Y: No, no, but since you teach English in college, you must know more grammar than us. We are not experts in the language, you see.

Ms. Z expressed similar anxieties to Anuja about teaching English. She repeatedly asked her to comment on any “mistakes” she may have made in the English class, and wished to know whether she spoke English “correctly”:

Ms. Z: I am not an expert in the English language. I have never been trained to teach English. I did my M.A. in another subject but when I came here I was told to teach English.

These conversations (conducted primarily in English) also indicate that teaching English is understood to be synonymous with teaching English grammar. Inspection patterns may also be responsible for this excessive emphasis on grammar.

Classes usually began with spelling drills where the students either had to copy out the new words in their spelling notebooks and practice writing them out three times or they were quizzed on spellings. Bringing a dictionary to class was mandatory and students were required to look up unknown words. Chapters were read aloud in sections by students and translated into Hindi by the teacher for comprehension.



There was hardly any attempt at discussing the context in which a word appeared so as to gradually draw out its meaning or a range of meanings.

The question-answer exercises based on the text would be done immediately after the chapter was read out. Most of these could be answered by quoting a single or at the most a couple of lines directly from the text. There was no further discussion of the piece. Teachers did not ask questions of their own that would require the students to think, to analyze and then to answer in their own words. After the questions were done, the grammar exercises were gone through. Here too, the fill-in-the-blanks exercises were done in a manner that did not allow the students the chance to grapple with words and their meanings or construct sentences on their own.

Time-management was critical, and was achieved at any cost. The potential of the textbook is thus to a large extent sabotaged by the systemic compulsions within the textual cycle.

At the same time, it became quite evident during our observations that the students are exposed to texts far more complicated than the ones they handle in class, through the print and the electronic media. They are able to understand, assess and discuss these other texts in their own words in Hindi/English or a mix of tongues.

When it comes to chapters from the English textbook, they are not required to engage at a subjective level either by the exercises in the textbook or by the teacher herself. English is therefore relegated to the position of a subject where words, sentences, meanings, poetry, prose and drama have to be memorized and reproduced in the examination. In none of the classrooms we went to did the students even begin to internalize the language to express their own ideas or to create and compose in their own manner, although many had the potential to do so.

Only a comparative project would establish whether this is exclusively the problem of English or whether *all* languages are similarly taught in a restricted manner, i.e. whether the problem is fundamentally one of an instrumentalized understanding of language and literature, English being perhaps an extreme example.

In the notes below, we pay attention to the following aspects of the teaching-learning practices of English: the physical space of the classroom; the focus on grammar; glimpses of other worlds revealed in student's conversations; and the nature and processes of comprehension during the English class.

# The Space for Poetry    Class III

Nivedita Basu

## Focus on Grammar in an English Class

In RPV, primary students are divided into Hindi and English sections depending on which option they choose as their medium of instruction. So, the RPV English teachers (of whom Ms. W is one) were most concerned, and not without reason, that students from the Hindi sections should be able to cope with the subject when English becomes compulsory from Class VI onwards.

In the interview conducted with Ms. W, English came across as *the* language of contemporary times; it is perceived as central to international exchange and transaction. Ms. W asked those students to raise their hands who would want to join the English section in Class VI. All the students without exception, in a class of 35 students, raised their hands. One of them said that he had already joined the British Academy (a local English language tutoring academy) for gaining “additional polish” in the subject.

All the students knew that speaking English was an important skill they needed to acquire in order to do well in life. Unfortunately, there was no attention paid to the difference in individual aspirations. Proficiency in the English language (interpreted to mean grammar) was the overarching concern of the teacher.

A typical lesson is given below.

Ms. W generally started her class by asking her students to read a particular lesson aloud. Students were asked to raise their hands and they read the poem “How Creatures Move”,\* one by one. The joy of movement did not figure in this or any other activities around the poem. Then, the new words were written on the blackboard and meanings discussed in English as well as in Hindi. Students copied down these words and their meanings and a dictation test was set up for the next

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\* *Marigold, Book III, Textbook in English for Class III*. New Delhi: NCERT, 2006, p. 97.

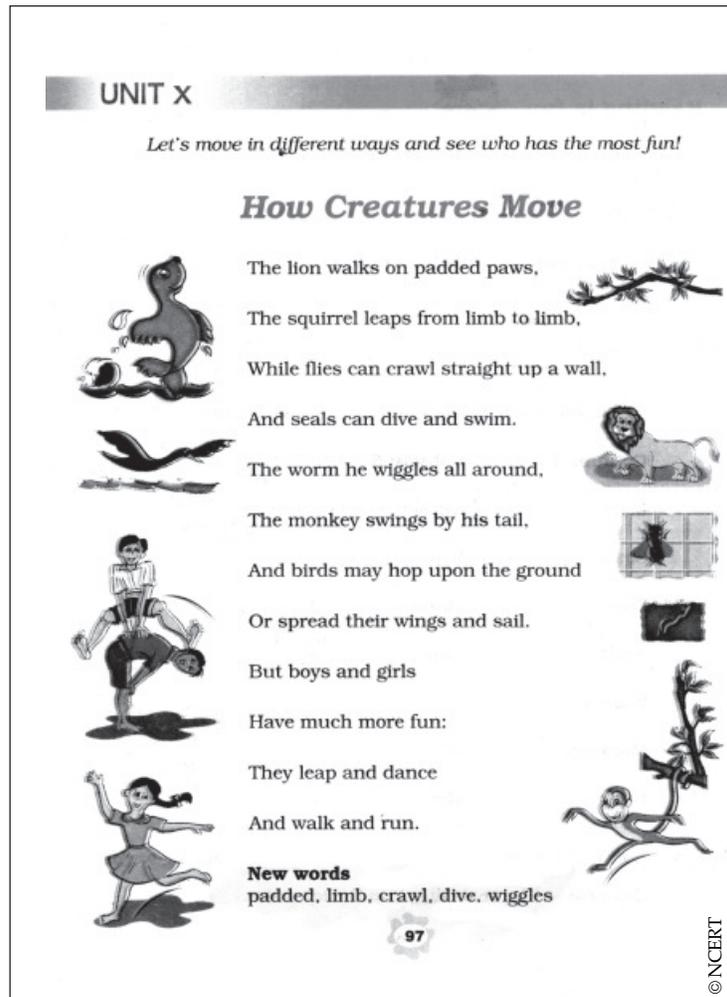
week. The question from “Talk Time”, “Why do boys and girls have the most fun?”, was discussed by students and the teacher for 10-12 minutes.

The students tried to work on the grammar exercises in their notebooks. Some questions were given as homework; the teacher checked them the following day.

The classes we could observe took place in the month of February (i.e. before a major exam); Ms. W took out time in two of her classes to revise

grammatical concepts taught through the year. In one class she discussed nouns, pronouns, prepositions, verbs and adverbs. Students recalled from memory the definition of these terms. Ms. W would speak a certain sentence and the students would point out the grammatical constituent under discussion.

In the classes that I observed, there was a tendency to over-emphasize memorization. Ms. W continuously held the book in her hands throughout the class, suggesting that everything that the students said would be checked against the book. In the reading session, she asked student after student to read the same poem over and over again. Many students were asked to answer the same question. Each child answered in the exact words that he had read in the text. Regimented response was induced specially by the sharp commanding voice used by the teacher. It had the effect of making the child submissive and docile.



The overall effect of this discipline meant that children had a limited outlet for their creative ability. I observed almost no original writing in the English classes that I sat through. The teacher emphasized the mastery of skills and memorization of facts, but did not encourage any self-expression. While the class was reading the poem "How Creatures Move", a child started talking about the lion and turtle story from the *Panchatantra* but he was silenced in the cause of maintaining discipline.

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Poetry was read and recited but along predictable lines. Not surprisingly, children were never called upon to create original verse.

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The classroom did not allow for any formal attempt to adjust learning to individual differences. For example, the children in the class that I visited came from three quite different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Two pupils were Bengalis (probably recent migrants from Bengal) and one was from Kerala, while the majority of students were from Hindi-speaking regions. (Of course, this begs the question, what kind of Hindi: Bundelkhandi? Bhojpuri? Haryanvi?) Admittedly, the problem of adjusting to individual differences in this situation is very difficult. The pupils were therefore treated as one group.

There was almost no attempt at engaging with the richness and complexity of the Indian multicultural situation. Rama Kant Agnihotri has pointed out how "Indian multiculturalism" is often characterized by the vernacular polyglot who uses one language at home, another among friends, and still another for academic and religious discourse.<sup>2</sup> Hindi was used often enough in the class, but primarily for ease of communication for teachers as well as students. It did not move beyond this function. There was an overwhelming attempt to stick to 'official English', especially in matters related to pronunciation. The Bengali child was constantly interrupted while he read the poem. Some children giggled as the teacher tried to 'correct' his alien pronunciation.

We know from recent studies<sup>3</sup> that variations in linguistic behaviour act as facilitators rather than as barriers in communication. Sustained bilingualism also leads to greater linguistic tolerance and more mental and cognitive flexibility. Cummins and Swain argue that "access to two languages in early childhood can promote children's meta-linguistic awareness and possibly also broaden aspects of cognitive development."

### **Physical Space of the Classroom**

For the purposes of our analysis the classroom space and its use was as relevant as was the teaching process. Most rooms in the school building had whitewashed walls. (This actually has tremendous potential for creative visual exercises and activities.) The furniture was usually limited to a blackboard mounted on the wall, a teacher's desk and chair, and an almirah to store craft materials as well as plates used for lunch. Charts with paintings by children were common. Along with the timetable, there were charts on geometrical figures, grammatical concepts, scientific processes, an essay on India Gate and an image of Ganesha. The visual display in the classroom, though varied, seemed to fit into an instructional genre and hardly fuelled the imagination.

In the Class V that Anuja observed in KV, every day a different aphorism would be written on the top of the blackboard with the date next to it. The aphorisms focused on the value of hard work, honesty, discipline and silence! Some examples: "Action speaks louder than words" and "Silence is golden". Charts with mathematical formulae, biological processes, drawings and paintings (usually depicting the natural world) were pasted on the walls, above the students' seats. The charts are not used for any active classroom session and the aphorisms are meant to be purely cautionary. In Jewitt's words, classrooms like these would present English "as a series of competencies that the students are to learn."<sup>4</sup>

The seating arrangement varied from class to class in RPV. The primary school students sat on mats for the most part, while middle school students had low benches approximately 10 inches high, which were used in tandem with slanting desks. In the primary classes of KV, the benches and desks were arranged in a rectangular fashion. It is not clear how the seating arrangements in both cases would affect the health, posture, efficiency, and ease of writing. On the other hand, they do give the needed mobility for varied group activities. In an art class of RPV, for instance, students were made to sit in two small circles so as to share colours. When listening to the teacher or while reading from the blackboard, the children sat facing the teacher.

This flexibility in seating and movement has much potential for an interactive teaching-learning process. How do we tap it?

## The Text and Beyond Class IV

### Sreyoshi Sarkar

#### Sessions 1-5; Class IV B

The desks were arranged to form a kind of square around which the students sat facing each other. The class had approximately 30 students. Although initially distracted and curious by the presence of an outsider (me), they soon settled down and were busy in their own discussions while tossing me questions from time to time about where I stayed, why I was there, and whether I was going to be their new teacher. Ms. X constantly reprimanded them whenever they were caught chatting with each other, but they continued exchanging notes from life all through the class. Ms. X, although visibly anxious about the impression such a situation would have on 'the observer', was not particularly harsh to her students.

During the time that I was present in the class, they were reading the last chapter from Unit 10 in the textbook for Class IV entitled "Pinochio".\* But some students sought to look beyond the text.

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*Devansh* (to his partner): Kal Pinochio aa raha tha TV pe; tu ne dekha?  
[Did you watch Pinochio? It was on TV yesterday.]

*Shaad* (trying to make conversation with me): Aap Speed Racer<sup>5</sup> ya Spiderman dekhte ho?  
[Do you watch Speed Racer or Spiderman?]

*Me*: Nahin, par maine Pokemon<sup>6</sup> dekha hai.  
[No, but I've seen Pokemon.]

*Shaad* (not giving up on me): Speed Racer bada sahi hota hai!!  
Vroooooommmmmmm, vrrroooooommmmm....  
[Speed Racer's really great!]

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\* *Marigold, Book IV, Textbook in English for Class IV*. New Delhi: NCERT, 2007, pp. 170-72.

*Richa and Rani* (chipping in): Hamein to didi Balika Vadhu<sup>7</sup> bahut acchi lagti hai.

[As for us, we like Balika Vadhu very much.]

*Me*: Usmein kya accha lagta hai aapko?

[What do you like about it?]

*Rani*: Hamein Anandi bahut acchi lagti hai. Wo usmein heroine hai.

[We really like Anandi. She's the heroine in the serial.]

*Shaad* (to all within hearing range especially of Rani and Richa): Ye didi mere ghar ke oopar rehti hain. Main inko bachpan se jaanta hoon.

[This didi lives right above our home. I've known her since childhood.]

There were indeed other activities initiated by the teacher which had the potential for encouraging classroom conversation. For example, the *Hindustan Times* supplement, *Youth*, was circulated in the all the classes; Ms. X said that the teachers would get the students particular paragraphs in order to "improve their English". I asked Richa whether she liked reading the newspaper, and if she did any such reading on her own. She said she liked to read "Hello Delhi", which is primarily an entertainment supplement.

These students are therefore exposed to a wide array of complex texts/materials outside their textbooks which they often associate with what they are reading or discussing in class. However, their thoughts and ideas find no space for articulation in the classroom because primacy is accorded to grammar and vocabulary exercises from the textbook. The question-answer format of the exercises also encourages memorization from the chapters. Their individual voices are stifled and they are unable to express their own feelings and opinions of the text, its theme/s, portrayal of characters, and so on.

The students are extremely imaginative and love making up stories at all times; for example, Shaad claiming me as an old acquaintance. However, they are comfortable expressing themselves only in Hindi. English as a subject becomes very technical and restrictive for them because within the classroom there is too much stress on correct spellings, pronunciation, dictionary meaning and grammar. The classroom does not provide them adequate freedom to play around and experiment with language and meanings so as to be able to make it part of their

thinking and imagination. Therefore, English is relegated to the formal space of the classroom and the textbook.

In urban areas like Delhi, no matter how lowly their social status, children are exposed to different kinds of spoken English as well as different compositions in English through hoardings across the city, the print and electronic media, films, the radio and the internet. Since these ubiquitous and familiar contexts are never brought up in classroom transaction, these children are unable to internalize the language, much less appreciate and contribute to the literature.

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I asked the students what they thought was being said about human beings in the chapter “The Giving Tree”. (137) The story is about a boy who keeps asking an apple tree for different things at different stages of life. The tree willingly gives its apples, branches and even its trunk till it is reduced to a mere stump. The boy never gives anything in return nor is ever grateful to the tree.

The students answered in Hindi and spoke about how the tree must have been hurt when the boy cut away the branches, how the boy was selfish etc. They were however very uncomfortable and unhappy about discussing the same ideas in English.

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The class on “Pinocchio” could become more interesting if Devansh were given the chance to compare and contrast the chapter on Pinocchio in the textbook for Class IV to what he had seen on television. If the film could be acquired and screened for the class, it would make the chapter much more fun and would definitely open up different themes for discussion. Realistically speaking of course, this possibility seems rather remote. But if more time were factored in for ‘conversation’ during class time, the teacher might be trained and enabled to encourage greater participation from the children, make English more relevant to their daily lives and make learning more fun.

### **Sessions 6-8: Class IV C**

I asked some of the students what they liked or hated about their English textbooks.

*Richa (IV B) and Kanchan (IV C):* We like the pictures, spellings and stories [in that order] in Marigold Textbook.

This meant that the material in the textbook did hold a great deal of interest for



## Fruitful Mistakes Class V

Anuja Madan

This case study focuses on the textual cycle around a story by Indira Mukherjee titled “Who will be Ningthou?”\* from Marigold Textbook for Class V, discussed in Class VA of a KV school.

I observed seven English classes over a period of two weeks, five of which focused on this chapter. Two were devoted to spelling and comprehension exercises. The classes were of half hour duration each.

### Sessions 1-3: Reading “Who will be Ningthou?”

The classes would start with Ms. Z scanning the handwriting notebooks in which students were to copy one page from the textbook every day as handwriting practice. (This would take up approximately 5 minutes.) The class sat in silence meanwhile. Ms. Z had explained to me on my first day that the KV valued “good handwriting.” On glancing through the notebooks, I saw that the same text had been repeated by almost every student. Had Ms. Z utilized different and more accessible texts even for the mechanical handwriting exercise, it may have piqued the students’ curiosity about literature, and about each other’s texts.

Ms. Z then proceeded to write the name of the chapter to be dealt with on the blackboard and asked the class to pronounce it collectively. She picked out students from among those who had raised hands, and asked them to read the text by turns. Most students were very responsive in raising their hands, and in echoing the answers after her. But only a few hands shot up when she interjected by asking questions about the text.

When the particular student who was reading came across the word “Manipur” in the introductory note to the story, she asked the class if they knew where the state was. Many raised their hands and pointed in the air towards the map.

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\* *Marigold, Book V, Textbook in English for Class V.* New Delhi: NCERT, 2008, p. 176-82.

However, not even the children sitting close to the map could reach it because it was approximately 3 feet above them, in a corner. She asked a student who had a scale to get up on the bench and point out the state using the scale. Given the distance of the map from most of the students, it was unlikely that any of them got a clear view. She then mentioned that Manipur was a part of the “North-East” but did not speak further about the state or the region or what that directional marker might mean.

Every time the child came across a Manipuri word (italicized in the text), Ms. Z would stop the student with a raised hand; she would write the word on the blackboard, pronounce it and ask the class to pronounce it after her (usually thrice). She may or may not have known the pronunciation of many of these Manipuri words: for example, “Sanajaoaba” which is a person’s name, or “Thouro” which means “Bravo”. The textbook offered no clues. Nevertheless, she would correct the pronunciation of every word that she felt was mispronounced.



Ms. Z did not stop during the reading of the story to discuss aspects of the story. She did not allow for anecdotes, digressions, comments or questions brought up from the lived reality of the students or the teacher. She would only stop to discuss meanings of the words, and in doing so, often went into revision of grammar (for example, asking students about parts of speech, variations in tense, etc.). When they came upon a difficult word, she would ask the students what it meant, and ask them to write down a couple of synonyms using their dictionaries (which a majority of them did not possess or at least did not bring to the class). At times, she mentioned the Hindi equivalent of the word.

The dictionary was the most important authority in this context. The teacher neither gave different meanings for one word; nor did she mention that a word often did have different meanings.

As observed by Nivedita and Sreyoshi in Classes III and IV, the focus in an English class is generally on reading in a standardized manner and on 'correct' pronunciation. In Class V of KV, 'standard English' was the benchmark against which the teacher judged both students and herself. The students strove to conform to 'standard English' as well as the norms that the authority figure of the teacher had set for them.

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The joy of reading a story was completely absent in this regimented, routinized style. Reading would surely become pleasurable if attention was paid to tonality, rhythm and gestures. The idea of playing with the language, of discovering language, is completely missing in the usual teaching-learning process prevalent in conventional English classrooms across the country.

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Thus subject English emerged as exclusively as a rule-bound language that had to be memorized, rather than literature that one participated in. There was no interplay between the two. The methods used to achieve the aim of language proficiency had a top-down instructional approach, and selective rules of grammar were reinforced. When asked to speak in their own words, the students were at a loss. Grammatical competency could be achieved through challenging and interesting drills, and through some generative exercises. While the textbook aimed at some variation, the classroom practices were not innovative enough to match this attempt.

#### **Sessions 4-6: On Comprehension**

The exercises at the end of this chapter were dealt with sequentially. An activity called "Fun with Sound Words" had a lot of scope, but the 'sound words' such as "zoom", "click", "pip-pop" were read out without any change in intonation by Ms. Z. (183) Children were not asked to generate more such words on their own; the teacher chose to concentrate on action words and their tenses.

The teacher read out the questions about the text and she asked the students to raise their hands if they knew the answer. The students read out the lines from the passages that held the answers. Ms. Z paraphrased the 'right' answers and dictated them. Even when a child seemed to know the answer, he was unable to phrase it in his own words in English, while he was comfortable doing so in Hindi. One important reason for this diffidence could be the focus on the 'correct'

way of phrasing a sentence. There was no room for error variation, despite the NFG's insistence that this should be allowed. Nor was the vision of multilingualism that the NCF and NFG had envisioned fulfilled in the classrooms we observed.

A similar orientation to questions was seen during the comprehension exercise Ms. Z had brought in. The excerpt from Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography (see the box below) was about his realization that good handwriting was a necessary part of education. Gandhi confessed that he had severely neglected his handwriting when he was young and regretted it in retrospect. The passage was quite complex and in no way matched the language competence of the class.

Students answered the questions by reading out the relevant lines from the passage. The answers deemed correct were those in which the student changed the person and tense as required. Ms. Z did not approve of answers which were correct in substance, but not in form.

But though I was none the worse for having neglected exercise, I am still paying the penalty of another neglect. I do not know whence I got the notion that good handwriting was not a necessary part of education, but I retained it until I went to England. When later, especially in South Africa, I saw the beautiful handwriting of lawyers and young men born and educated in South Africa, I was ashamed of myself and repented of my neglect. I saw that bad handwriting should be regarded as a sign of an imperfect education. I tried later to improve mine, but it was too late. I could never repair the neglect of my youth. Let every young man and woman be warned by my example, and understand that good handwriting is a necessary part of education. I am now of the opinion that children should first be taught the art of drawing before learning how to write. Let the child learn his letters by observation as he does different objects, such as flowers, birds, etc., and let him learn handwriting only after he has learnt to draw objects. He will then write a beautifully formed hand.

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When Ms. Z asked them to write down answers on their own, students were at a loss. She then proceeded to write the answers on the board. Looking through their notebooks, I saw that even when they were copying down sentences they made fundamental grammatical errors, and their basic sentence structures were awry. When I started rewriting some of their answers, many of them requested me to explain the passage to them, which they had not understood.

Clearly, the students want to move beyond memorization without comprehension.

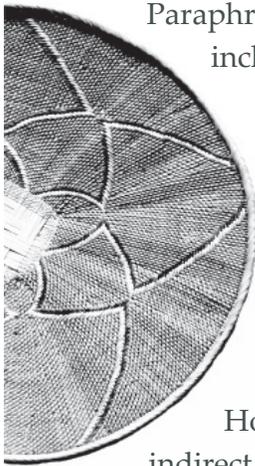
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In this passage, for example, the first question was: “What did Gandhiji consider to be an unnecessary part of education?” In the first paragraph of the excerpt, Gandhiji mentioned that when he was young he believed good handwriting to be an unnecessary part of education. The rest of the excerpt actually traced his changed views. However, both Ms. Z and the students mechanically concluded that “good handwriting was an unnecessary part of education”!

Ideally, Ms. Z could have explained the thrust of the passage before the question-answer exercise. The focus in many classrooms seems to be just the completion of the task for the record.

Rama Matthew had mentioned to us how reading with varying tones, gestures and facial expressions could make the meaning of a text clear even to students whose competency in English was fairly low. The teachers we observed did not use such techniques when students were at a loss.

The new policy documents sought to free children from “the burden of sheer incomprehension.” But the format of exam questions as well as classroom practices systematically turn away students from grasping the overall meaning of the passage. Our observations also showed that students faced performance anxiety when doing these exercises because these were associated with testing.



Paraphrasing is a useful exercise, but at what point does it include comprehension?

How fruitful is it to answer questions by paraphrasing sentences from the text without comprehending the meaning of the passage?

Can comprehension exercises be reframed (in texts and classes) in a way that would awaken the child’s innate desire to know?

How can students be trained to draw out answers to indirect and non-literal questions?

The choice of this passage, though, was well thought out — Ms. Z lost no opportunity in telling the children that her emphasis on their good handwriting had illustrious backing! The consistent use of valorized texts and reputed/iconic authors insidiously serve to perpetuate the reliance on authority that seems to be ingrained in the system.

### Responses to the Textbooks

My personal interaction with the students was limited because Ms. Z liked a silent classroom, and my teaching hours at college did not allow me to wait till their lunch break. However, in the small gaps between classes, I did manage to ask the students about Textbook V. (Our conversation took place in Hindi, since students were uncomfortable conversing in English.) The reasons that some gave for liking the textbook were: it was colourful, had lots of stories and fun activities. Others had a more lukewarm response. Some stories were not considered interesting; for example “Robinson Crusoe” and “The Talkative Barber”. On being asked about their favourite subject, most said Hindi; no one mentioned English. Ms. Z gave her whole-hearted approval of the new textbooks, for the same reasons that the students did. She also liked the textbooks for their inclusion of ‘classics’ and for their focus on language and grammar.

### Fruitful Mistakes

Unquestionably, the textbook was given absolute primacy in the classroom by the teacher. Hardly any other teaching or learning material was used. Moreover, the teaching of the textbook was not accompanied by gestures, any interesting activities, or any kind of innovation. The focus was on ‘explanations’ by the teacher of the literal meaning of each text.

The teacher saw herself as the authority figure and students as the recipients of information and knowledge. She assumed the role of a judge deciding whether answers were correct or incorrect, and was uncomfortable negotiating with subjective interpretations of the text and experiences. Students were not encouraged to struggle and err to arrive at a more accurate if divergent range of meanings. Mistakes were never seen as an essential part of the learning process.

The class was categorized (explicitly and implicitly) into “weak”, “lazy” or “bright” and “hardworking” students, both by the teachers and by the students themselves. I noticed that the “weakest” students did not raise their hands for anything, including the opportunity to read. A vicious cycle of exclusion seemed to be in place. Neither classroom practices nor the textbooks allowed children to work at their individual pace and build on their preexisting levels of competence. Nor did the learning process harness the varied skills/resources of the students.

The teacher was very open to listening to my ideas for innovation, but seemed to doubt the competence level of the students to carry them out. In her words,

They’re all children of IVth class government employees. How much of good English can you expect of them?

Ms. Z was in agreement with the idea of a class library, and said that she was keen on beginning the reading program devised for CBSE schools by EFLU (English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad). EFLU has designed a range of reading cards for students working with different levels of reading abilities.

Many changes need to be made in the transaction of English textbooks which would do justice to the aims stated in the policy documents. Teacher training is a prerequisite for such aims. Innovative ways of approaching comprehension exercises and reading must be adopted in the classrooms.

More fundamentally, teachers need to be encouraged to view themselves as learners and have a more fluid perspective on the teaching-learning processes. Until we accept the *necessity* of 'mistakes' and continuously work (at all levels) towards generating varied interpretations of texts, subject English will continue to be an alien realm for a majority of Indian children.

#### Notes

1. Carey Jewitt, "Multimodality and Literacy in School Classrooms." *Review of Research in Education*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2008): 247-48.
2. R.K. Agnihotri, "India: Multilingual Perspectives," in Nigel T. Crawhall (ed.), *Democratically Speaking: International Perspectives On Language Planning*. Salt River, Cape Town: National Language Project, 1992, p. 46.
3. R.K. Agnihotri (1992) mentions the following scholars: Peal and Lambert (1962); Gardner and Lambert (1972); and Cummins and Swain (1986).
4. Carey Jewitt, *op. cit.*, p. 260.
5. "Speed Racer" is an English adaptation of the Japanese manga and anime "Mach Go Go Go" which is about automobile racing.
6. "Pokemon" is the abbreviated form of "Pocket Monsters" and is another Japanese animated series about a young boy and his friends and their various adventures.
7. "Balika Vadhu" is a Hindi serial aired on the channel Colours. It aims to protest against the evils brought on by child marriage.

## Afterword

In the two odd years since this study was conducted members of the research team dispersed to different parts of the country and to other continents. Our plans for intensive workshops are yet to be realized, though we shall suggest some possibilities below.

Our focus was the textbook, given the important role it played within a larger system that needs to be taken in its entirety. We found that the engagement of the new textbooks with the NCF and NFG was partial. In our respective sections we have tried to suggest where and why this is so. Not surprisingly, we realized that until teacher orientation workshops are undertaken in a serious and sustained manner, even innovative textbooks would not get the attention they deserve. Classroom transactions would still remain limited if the modes of evaluation remain the same.

A predominant concern emerged during our work as well as in the discussions following our presentation at Hoshangabad: How can India's multilinguality be used as a classroom resource? 'Multilinguality', it will be clear by now, is used to mean very different things, in terms of our language learning abilities, approaches to pedagogy, textbook content and a mode of interaction.

Does subject English bring its own laws of repression and erasure? Or is it potentially that contemporary space where the trivial and the profound jostle freely in many modes and many tongues? How can this be a conscious and meaningful site of experimentation, rather than a loss or simply a marker for linguistic laziness?

Arguably, one would have to look at *all* the subject books of a given class (social science in particular) to come up with a considered response. This would necessarily be a larger comparative project, complementing the present one, which is in the nature of a pilot study. One might similarly wish to study how English and/or other Indian languages figure in the textbooks of Hindi language and literature.

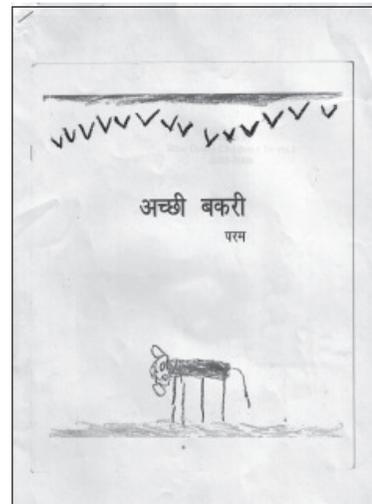
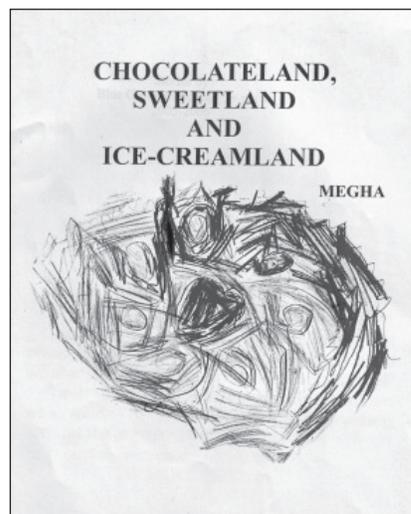
A related area that needs further exploration is how do textbooks negotiate the key policies regarding diversity of cultures, castes and religions of India. 'Multiculturalism', increasingly offered as a catch-all 'solution', is at best a fraught term. In the historical moment we inhabit, we need to be wary of as well as critically engage in nuanced ways with identity politics as they are usually played out in relation to language, culture and pedagogy.

### What Next?

Like the ideal textbooks, our short-term study opened up many possibilities for future work and thought. A few ideas that emerged after discussions with the Eklayva team at Hoshangabad:

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- ❖ A series of workshops on various components of the literary: what is a story, what is a poem, what is the difference between stories written in first person and in third person, what it might mean to speak *for* children, what is evocative and what didactic. . . . The overarching question is: How do we kindle interest in literature? The workshops would ideally comprise people of various backgrounds and disciplines, representative of different levels of the educational setup in our country.
  - ❖ Other intensive short-term but continuing series of workshops may be conceptualized well before the actual textbook making process is initiated. These can be very specific, enabling teachers and textbook makers to grapple with questions of form and genre, the relationship of sound to image, the nature of contemporary idioms and speech patterns, word games and word play.
  - ❖ Experimenting with different genres, such as the evocative lullabies that have been compiled in a companion project – "Songs in Many Tongues" – by Prachee Dewri, Kristina Zama, Aditi Chand and others during the same period.
  - ❖ Booklets (booklings!) on selected texts, and alternative approaches to working with them for teaching-learning sessions.
  - ❖ Radio programmes on short texts which would approach the texts differently and focus on voice and intonation as forms of expressivity.
  - ❖ Imagining anew the role of the visual in the textbook – a largely unexplored world.
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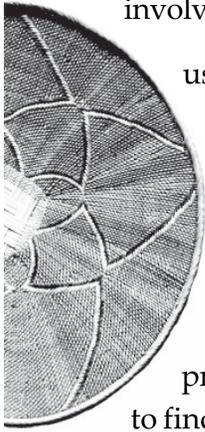
This could include works by children. In a group project done for Rimli Bhattacharya's M. Phil. course on Children's Literature (2006), Anuja Madan and Sreyoshi Sarkar along with two other classmates studied the stories narrated by 4-5 years old children from Mirambika, an alternative school located in New Delhi. The school had published for internal distribution a set of these stories and the accompanying illustrations the children had made in slim four-colour books.



For older children, the visual has to be more carefully conceptualized in contemporary and challenging ways. As Sreyoshi Sarkar comments on the students she observed, "They have moved beyond pictures telling stories as objects of supreme interest. The visual still fascinates them but they are capable of tackling the more demanding content of books."

English is today the language of science globally. (Rammohun Roy had wished to introduce English education in colonial India for he saw it as the language of Western science and technology.) The English textbook at the primary level cannot function as a 'neutral' source of information. It does not need to impersonate the internet, but neither is it exclusively an anthology of fiction.

Certain features that the texts should share :



involve selection, organization;

using questions to guide learners;

understanding concepts rather than only memorizing facts;

developing reading skills, critical analytic skills;

challenging unsound assumptions;

provoking curiosity: speculating and encouraging learners to find out about what is not said!

Teachers and textbook writers as well as policy makers can work with more focus if they have access to or are already informed about the larger field of children's literature. They would then be in a position to offer a disparate group of 'emergent readers' with varying levels of choices.

The difficult and exciting process of creating textbooks, which at least a generation (of teachers and students) will have to work with, demands both an individual and a collective effort. At the very least, we need to develop 'a frame of reference' about children's literature. This not only requires exposure to literature in different languages but, more importantly, being willing to extend the definition of literature to other expressive forms that are still so vibrant and meaningful in the Asian subcontinent.

Equally critical is an awareness of *children's* responses to literature and the world they live in, perhaps the first step in bringing together separate spheres. Sreyoshi's notes on 'classroom chatter' open up some lively lines of enquiry.

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Studying ('eavesdropping' on) informal exchanges between students will give teachers and textbook makers an insight into the ways in which links or breaks are made in conversation, what silence may signify, how the body speaks, how cues work; in other words, into the nature of a shared or overlapping cultural vocabulary.

We could have a more vivid sense of what children, of different ages, milieus and social status, *bring to school* in terms of languages, exposure to forms, media, skills and talents and range of information. Very often, children are most creative when they appear to be 'wasting time', and are seen to be not engaged with the formal classroom transaction. How can we tap this energy?

One should again emphasize that the intention behind such studies *would not be to replicate* the mindlessness, the vulgarity and the often reactionary/conservative politics or what is promoted so aggressively as 'entertainment' by mass media today.

Yet, it will not help to ignore the pervasive and powerful impact (on children and adults alike) of advertisements, reality shows, television soaps and serials, on-line gaming and animations. It would only increase the distance between the bombardment of contemporary life and the avowed aspirations of institutional structures within which textbooks and teachers are shaped.

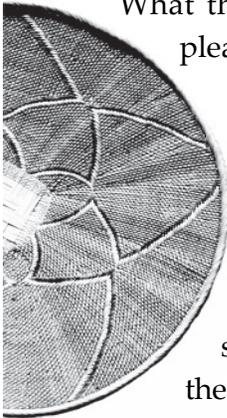
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The task would then be:

- ❖ to create new forms and ways of looking;
- ❖ to find ways of asking new questions;
- ❖ to articulate in as many ways as possible, in many languages;
- ❖ to express in an English that is itself open to change.

Will not such awareness help in conceptualization of the textbook, trialing material, improving the quality of classroom transaction, teacher training and assessing the potential to generate fresh material from the 'given' text?

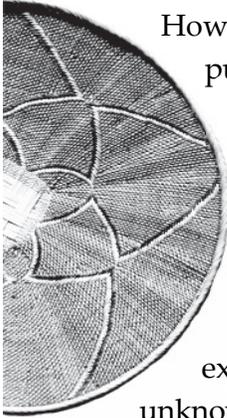
The years of growth amongst elementary school children are so rapid and in such manifold (even unimaginable) directions that the teacher and textbook writers and artists are challenged to continually rethink the contents of and approaches to these books.



What then is considered relevant, useful, necessary— even if not pleasurable? In short, what are the principles of selection?

What kind of expectations do we have from children, based on generalizations or stereotypes of their age, class, gender, ethnicity, caste or any other factor?

What do we believe they need to know or not know? For example, how do we translate principles of secularism into the selection of the teaching-learning material and the treatment of the material?



How can pluralism of beliefs be transmitted without turning it into pure ideology?

What does it mean to be sensitive to the possibility of ‘hurting the sentiments’ of any community, minority or otherwise? Should we assume that all experience is universal?

If everyday life is realized in culturally specific practices and beliefs, to what extent might the textbook reflect this? To what extent should it aim for an intertwining of the known and the unknown, the specific and the general, a nuanced ‘universal’ as it were?

Assuming that one has a ‘balanced collection’, how can we encourage ‘critical reading’? The selection of texts then becomes only the first step. What do you do with the text? How do you avoid literal interpretations? Literalism in literature is a kind of fundamentalism too!

There will probably never be a ‘perfect’ textbook.<sup>1</sup> The same could be said of this study, which poses more questions than it claims to have answered.

Rimli Bhattacharya and Anuja Madan  
December 2012

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*Note*

1. Carol Bertram, Peter Ranby et al., in John Gulting (ed.), *Using Media in Teaching. Learning Guide*. Cape Town: South African Institute of Distance Education and Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 193.

# Appendices

## Original Concept Note

This project is an attempt to study textbooks of subject English prescribed by CBSE for children in classes III to V (approximately 8-10 years old) over the last ten years. We intend to explore the connection between the textbooks and the educational policies and pedagogical guidelines issued by NCERT and CBSE for subject English in primary schools. In selecting the children of this particular age-group, we proceed from the belief that these classes mark an especially important period of transition in children's education from elementary school (nursery to Class II) to senior school (Class VI onwards). These are also the years by which usually basic language acquisition has happened and elementary reading and writing skills have been acquired (in at least the mother tongue). We would be focusing on schools in Delhi.

Our aim would be to study the textbooks and educational policies to address a few concerns:

- ❖ How do the bodies of educational research and policy in India conceptualize and position subject English within primary school education? We would deal with its valorization within the curriculum. What are, according to these bodies, the pedagogical, ideological and didactic aims of this discipline? In what ways are these shaped by the current socio-political contexts in India? Is English viewed as primarily a medium of instruction? The shadow of colonialism still looms large in the construction of knowledge, and these issues need to be addressed within that paradigm.
- ❖ In what ways are they conceptualizing children's literature in English? What are the orientations and principles behind their idea of children's literature? We shall draw the connections between the idea of children's literature and textbooks and seek to answer a few of the following concerns: In what ways is 'children's literature'

appropriated and constructed to serve the pedagogical aims of the educational boards? What are the processes via which literature is transformed into the space of the textbooks? Are the textbooks seeking to stand in for children's literature? What kinds of children are targeted? What are the reasons behind privileging and including certain texts, and excluding others? Is there a kind of canon being constructed in these textbooks? We have seen from our preliminary reading that there is an inclusion of Western canonical texts of children's literature as well as Indian (including regional) texts meant for children.

- ❖ Are the textbooks aiming to be 'multicultural'?

The issue of multiculturalism needs to be explored within the context of the shrinking liberal space in India, and the homogenization of identities sought to be imposed by global capital. In what ways are these texts involved in imparting a multicultural education? This can be broadly understood to mean the kind of education that takes into account in some way the ethnic/cultural differences between pupils, in relation to their social and economic backgrounds, and seeks to remove the various disadvantages that minority groups of children suffer from. But learning about differences and learning to deal with them is important for all children and teachers. A number of issues need to be addressed within this paradigm, such as whether multicultural education continues to perpetuate, in different guises, the system of education that disadvantages minority children. We would seek to identify the underlying assumptions, meanings, and orientations of multiculturalist discourse and practice within these textbooks, especially within the context of its growing popularity as a trend in school education. Are the underlying notions of discourse parochial in nature, or are they able to move beyond that?

- ❖ What are the pedagogical practices that are being foregrounded in the teaching of English literature?

Our research will explore the proposition that primary school pedagogy works within a tradition that over-emphasizes repetition, recitation and decoding at the expense of meaning-making and the child's creative negotiation with texts (oral or written). This issue

will be addressed in relation to the new developments regarding curriculum which claim to foreground learner-centered, participatory, interactive teaching. Does the pedagogical positioning of the subject allow for a creative space for imagination, transformation, mediation and resistance on the part of the child?

- ❖ How do the textbooks translate the policies \ assumptions of the educational boards in question?
- ❖ We would study the process of inclusion and omission of certain texts in the textbook in detail (questions at the end of the chapters, the designing and the content of the text) to explore the connections between policy and praxis and the process of textbook construction. We shall look at the question of revision of syllabi/textbook contents and the extent to which this process is considered important and is actually active in the NCERT and the CBSE.

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### **Modalities**

We seek to address the above issues through:

A detailed critical analysis of the textbooks for English prescribed for Classes III to V, NCERT policies and CBSE guidelines on education for primary schools. We shall be looking at these textbooks and guidelines over the last ten years, and thus our project would be archival in nature.

Interviewing members (and the director) of NCERT and CBSE on their pedagogical aims, educational agendas, and their policies/guidelines on English literature for CBSE Classes III-V and primary school teachers (in government and privates schools) etc.

A visit to two government CBSE schools in Delhi to observe and study the dissemination processes of 'literature' in the classroom space, and student response, as enabling and/or limiting.

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In the next phase, we hope to include Hindi literature and discuss aspects of multilingualism across classrooms in detail. We would like to compare English textbooks used by private and government schools in Delhi's urban, semi-urban and rural areas, and also how English is taught in private and government schools. At a later stage, we could also do a comparative study of the ICSE and CBSE syllabi for English and their textbooks.

## A Note on Our 'Ideal' Textbook

After doing a microanalysis of some texts in the Marigold textbooks, Rimli Bhattacharya threw a challenging question at us: What would you do differently? When asked to create our own alternatives, we realized it was much easier to offer critiques of the textbooks! As we started working on this section, Rimli Bhattacharya encouraged us to constantly clarify and challenge our assumptions about literature, children's literature, the nature of the literary, the textbook, and the classics etc. She encouraged us to think about fundamental questions like: What makes for a good story? What is the relationship between language and literature?

Our ideas about the 'ideal' English textbook for students of primary classes and middle school are listed below (some were spontaneous, and some emerged through discussion):

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It should stimulate children's interest, curiosity, be enjoyable as well as facilitate multifaceted learning.

It should experiment with genres, and play with the notion of a text.

It should encourage student-initiated learning.

The text-based exercises should move away from the idea of any *one* correct answer, and give space to creative interpretation and subjective engagement.

The grammar-based activities should be interesting. They should not be given precedence over other activities.

Preaching values, morals and social awareness should not be

the explicit intention of each chapter. Some texts might be simply entertaining and humorous. Some should provoke children to think about their values and beliefs but not idealize any one in particular. They should instead be thought-provoking and generate discussion.

It should try to relate to students' everyday contexts as far as possible.

The language used in the book should be simple, but working with multiple registers. Students should be exposed to different varieties of English: Indian English should be discussed as a fast changing language and the idealization of British English needs to be undercut. A multilingual approach would be essential.

The students should be stimulated to reflect on their cultures and identities, and the processes shaping the latter.

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C

## From Pippa

I have not tried to make these few pages representative of Pippa Stein's life and work. But they tell us something of her location, her journeys in pre- and post-apartheid South Africa.

Even these brief extracts offer glimpses of her capacity to work with and in living cultures, often teaming up to collaborate in most fruitful ways with colleagues around her and others that she found across continents.

Working from the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), Johannesburg, she was part of the Wits Multiliteracies Project since 1996, the basis of much of her work.

Like her projects, much of her academic work was collaborative. The following paragraphs are from an article that Pippa Stein wrote with Denise Newfield<sup>1</sup>:

... difference can be valued as a resource that moves children out of their sense of the ordinary, ruptures their assumptions about the normative, and opens up the space for reframing their understanding of their position in relation to other norms....

Discussions...can lead into deeper, more complex questions about global inequality and social injustices: Who gets access to education and why; the relationship between Africa and the world; the rich and the poor. And this discussion takes place not in an abstract way, with textbook examples on children's rights to education, but focused on a real, living child who is communicating his thoughts, feelings and desires to a receptive and empathetic audience.

Through the use of multiple modes of representation of self, children from different language backgrounds are finding ways to communicate. We think that such processes, which take children beyond their immediate social and physical location, are ways of producing situated knowledge, showing them that the public sphere really matters. This is the beginning of developing a social group perspective, which can now lead into further, more critical inquiry in relation to global differences.

... students and teachers across the city of Johannesburg have taken those first small steps on what Mandela calls the long and difficult road to freedom.

These steps are real, they are palpable, they are stitched in cloth, they are sung in four-part harmonies, they are chanted in praise poems, and they are written down in the words of many African languages—Zulu, Sotho, Xhosa, English, and Portuguese. They are the voices of the land resonating outward. But that is not enough. To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to begin to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. That is our major challenge: how to work with our students in a way that moves beyond racism, prejudice, and massive inequalities toward social justice for all.<sup>2</sup>

'A love of life and scholarship' is how writer Nadine Gordimer remembered Pippa in the *Mail & Guardian*, 15 August 2008.<sup>3</sup>

Gordimer begins:

I first knew Phillipa Stein as the little girl Pippa, beautiful and highly intelligent, a sign of the qualities that were to be fulfilled bountifully when she grew up.

Later, she and Malcolm Purkey, who was to become her husband, were friends of my son when Pippa and Malcolm were members of the group of talented young white and black men and women living and working together on projects in the arts, defiant of racist laws in their mini-commune, Junction Avenue, Parktown. . . .

Of the many ways that Pippa brought different worlds together:

When Wits instituted in my name an honour that is usually posthumous, an annual public lecture, Pippa Stein occupied herself with unsparing organisational exigence to create a vision of an annual event that would bring together the university and a nation-wide audience to define the meaning of a university in the wider community. . . . She virtually hosted, in all their diverse and sometimes taxing needs, the great thinkers and writers, Susan Sontag, Carlos Fuentes and Amartya Sen in the first three years of their lectureship . . . .

Gordimer celebrates the spirit of Pippa's work:

Love of life and scholarship were one, in Dr Phillipa Stein and Pippa Stein. This remarkable synthesis produced demanding energy, after a brave encounter with cancer, to complete her PhD at the University of London, the thesis *Multimodal Pedagogies in Diverse Classrooms: Rights, Representations and Resources*, published in this, the last year of her life. It has been highly praised, one reviewer declaring 'the book breathed life into theory.

. . . She breathed life into every situation and circumstance in which she was involved.

A description of this remarkable book from the publisher's blurb:

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This insightful book argues that classrooms can become 'transformative' sites in which students can develop curricula and pedagogies which speak to the diversity of global societies, and looks at:

- ❖ How multimodality can be used to promote social justice and democracy in diverse classrooms;
  - ❖ The forms of representation through which students make meaning in classrooms;
  - ❖ How those forms contribute to the building of democratic cultures;
  - ❖ The cultural resources available to students, and how they are used for learning;
  - ❖ Difference as a productive energy for learning.
- 

And, in Pippa's own words from the Introduction:

A primary aim was to develop children's 'voices'. As such, this pedagogy was deeply influenced by Freire's critical pedagogy (1970; Freire and Macedo 1987) which had already impacted on several of the progressive adult education programmes in South Africa at that time. We wanted to promote a culture of talking rather than fighting and help children to reflect critically on the social and material conditions of their lives so they could understand the root causes of the violence they were witnessing and experiencing. At the time, this 'culture of talking' was developed in and through one language – English – because I was committed at that time to working in an 'English as the target language' teaching model. Since then I have changed my views: developing a 'culture of talking' means working with all the language resources that children have access to. In Gauteng, where I live and work, most children are multilingual, drawing on several African languages in their communicative repertoires.

Language was not the only mode of communication, however. Because children had different levels of access to English, and talk was potentially dangerous, there were many instances where they wanted to tell their stories through dance, music and performance, with no watertight divisions. Drawing became a more direct way of showing what was difficult to describe. These sessions became known as 'Behind the Headlines' because in a very real sense, most of the experiences witnessed or reported on were suppressed in the national media. These multimodal texts then became the primary texts around which discussion and critical reflection would happen.<sup>4</sup>

Making the discussion happen . . . is what we find in the textbooks that she co-authored. I cite one instance which I found most powerful. In "The Long and Winding Road to School", Unit 8 in *Level Best: An English course for secondary*

*schools* that Pippa co-authored with Emilia Potenza,<sup>5</sup> there are sections on the history of schooling, with information about the “The first schools in Britain”, “How schoolchildren wrote”, moving on to “The history of schooling in South Africa”, and “Resistance in Education”. Finally in “The unknown victim. . .” from the infamous Soweto Uprising of 1976, the focus is not only on Hector Pieterse — the first schoolboy who was killed by the firing of the police on the unarmed marchers — but of the teenager who tried to carry Pieterse to a hospital in his arms.

The photographs, line drawings, newspaper quotes, and excerpts from everyday life that weave into the ‘unit’ also pause for reflection, for thinking and working together in class, encouraging learners to ask the often unaskable about oppression, violence, censorship.

For Pippa, as a teacher-educator, a co-writer, and in the environment she actively sought to create around her, the entry point was the stimulation necessary for discussion and expression. And the expressive played across a range of modes — visual, aural, performative, and what we may loosely call craft. A thoughtful and fruitful affirmation that is born of one’s own praxis. That inspires me in my own search to move out of insulated spaces.

Rimli Bhattacharya

#### Notes

1. Pippa Stein and Denise Newfield, “Shifting the Gaze in South African Classrooms: New Pedagogies, New Publics, New Democracies.” In *Thinking Classroom*, Vol. 5, no. 1 (January 2004), pp. 28-36.
2. My warm thanks to Snehlata Gupta for selecting these passages from an article which deserved to be present here in its full vitality and insight.
3. Nadine Gordimer’s entire column may be found at <http://mg.co.za/article/2008-08-15-a-love-of-life-and-scholarship>. Accessed on 2 November 2012.
4. Pippa Stein, *Multimodal Pedagogies in Diverse Classrooms*. Oxon: Routledge, 2008, p. 5.
5. Pippa Stein and Emilia Potenza, *Level Best: An English course for secondary schools*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1995, pp. 118-32.

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Anuja Madan, Sreyoshi Sarkar and Nivedita Basu

Delhi

June 2009



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**Nivedita Basu** is assistant professor in English at Kirori Mal College, Delhi. In 2008 she completed her M.Phil. thesis that explored the working class origins of early Victorian melodrama. Her areas of interest include gender studies, especially in the literature of the Renaissance and the Victorian period. At present she is working on her doctoral dissertation focusing on the modernist aspects of Victorian stagecraft.

**Rimli Bhattacharya** trained in Comparative Literature at Jadavpur and Brown Universities. She has taught in India and in the USA. She is currently in the Department of English, Delhi University. She works in the field of visual arts and cinema. Her research and publication interests include narrative theory, performance theory and history, translation studies, children's literature and primary education.

# Eklavya

Eklavya is a non-government registered society working in the fields of education and peoples' science since its inception in 1982. Its main aim is to develop educational practices and material that are related to a child's environment, and are based on play, activities and creative learning.

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